時々ボソッとロシア語でデレる隣のアーリャさん
Хорошо, я верю тебе.
燦々SUN イラストももこ
story by sun sun sun illustration by momoco
6
角川スニーカー文庫

時々ボソッとロシア語でデレる隣のアーリャさん

Иногда Аля внезапно кокетничает по-русски

6

「おかえりなさいませぇ～♥
ご主人様♥ お嬢様♥」
ののあ

「はい、どうぞ」

「ふぅ…ようやく！」

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政近の
脳内住人その2
吹き飛ばされても
そのうち復帰する

Alya Sometimes Hides Her Feelings in Russian Volume 6, Fan Translation

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Prologue - My Wizard

"Alya, you're such a hard worker."

Since I was a child, I have been told these words many times. I always felt a sense of discomfort with those words. I just did my best, why should I be praised? It's only natural that we should do our best to deal with what's in front of us, and it would be strange if we didn't.

Even after realizing that these ideas of mine belonged to an extreme minority, I had no intention of changing my way of life. I should just keep working hard and aiming high, to attain my ideal self……

"If you don't like it so much, do it by yourself!"

At that moment when I was nine years old and my classmates isolated me like that, I knew that I didn't want anyone to understand this way of life. It doesn't matter if no one understands me, if no one praises me, as long as I myself know of my efforts, that's all that matters. I had no hesitation in continuing to aim high on my own in this way. ……At least that was how it was supposed to be. Until that day at school when the teacher asked me that question.

"What do you want to be in the future?"

It was a simple question, really. But I was horrified to find that the answer to that question was not within me.

I had no goals in life. Anyway, while striving for greater heights, I myself didn't know what I was looking for at the end of it all. The moment I realized this, I had doubts and hesitations about my own way of life, which was simply just seeking to reach higher and higher.

I'm like a balloon who's……mooring rope was broken.[1] I could only fly upwards. The more I fly, the darker the scenery becomes and the harder it is to breathe. Still, there was no one to ask for help. There was no one to even ask if this way of life was right or not.

I would like someone to fly at the same height and speed as me. Once you know you are not alone, your hesitation will surely disappear. If I can have someone to compete with, I won't be afraid to fly towards the dark. But there is no one out there. I left them all behind. I was the one who decided to aim higher. There is no turning back now.

Looking down from the small cage at the distant ground below, I fly upward, still terrified of crashing. I don't know what's ahead of me, or where I'm going, but I'll keep going and going and going.....

"Why do you want to be student body president?"

When he once asked me that, I answered immediately. I wanted to be it because I just wanted to be. They said there was no reason to aim that high. But I knew myself that.....it was not the complete truth. I purposely answered immediately so as not to be pursued any further in depth.

Because.....there were also more selfish feelings involved in my pursuit of student body president. In the end, I wanted someone to approve of me. That my way of life is not wrong. When I entered Seirei Gakuen, I knew that if I could stand there..... in the position of student body president, which is supported and respected by many students, I would be free from this suffocating feeling. I knew that my hesitation would disappear and I would no longer be afraid of going through the darkness, where I could not see the way ahead.

"I know Kujou-san is working hard."

I can't tell you how much those words meant to me. He probably doesn't even know. He was like a wizard. A mean wizard who does not use a vehicle, but flies freely and unrestrictedly with only his body. He didn't care which side was up and which side was down. At times, he would fly around me to tease me as I cower in my cage and continue to fly blindly. At other times, he flew above me to guide me.

I felt no fear of falling or going into the dark because of him. I was annoyed by his overly free behavior and made a lot of petty complaints. But he handled my complaining from inside the cage as if I were a child.....which also annoyed me. It was infuriating, yet enjoyable. I was lonely when he wandered off, and yet I resented the fickleness of him being by my side when I found myself.....really knowing. He was the

only one who stood by my side. His presence was my salvation. That's why……

"Shut up and take my hand! Alya!"

That is why I took his hand then. Taking his hand and jumping out of the cage, I realized how small a world I was living in. That there were many others in the sky that I thought I was flying in alone. That they travel the skies in their own ways, sometimes alone, sometimes working together. Each way of flying has its own charm and it was just an illusion that the one flying higher……was better. If you don't fly high enough, there are places you can't reach. But there are places you can't get to or view by just flying high. And……

"Alya's singing is really beautiful!"

"I really like the name of the band…… Thanks."

"Is your throat okay? Please don't over-practice and injure your throat."

"Alyaaa, do you want some chips~?"

If I have the courage to step out, there are people who will take me for a ride. All those things he taught me.

But……he will never, ever be on a proper ride someday. As if by magic, he would get in and get out of the ride in a flash. He wanders through the sky, traversing vehicles on a whim. A wizard who should be able to go anywhere, but has no grasp of where he is going.

He was carrying something heavy and he never wanted to show it. Whenever I try to understand him on a deeper level, he always teases, brushes it off and misleads me. I always think it's his way of rejecting me……and that I shouldn't step in. The truth is, I really want to know. I would love to get closer to his heart. But he's a fickle wizard……and I felt that if I forced myself to approach him, he would wander away again. I just can't bring myself to ask him.

Hey, Masachika. What are you seeking? What are you holding on to? How long will you stay by my side? For you, I'd like to……

[1]: Hot air balloons are usually tied to ropes, called “mooring ropes,” to prevent them from rising to altitude levels too high, so the analogy here is that Alya was aiming too high for nothing.

Chapter 1 - These Guys Are Way Too Into This

"One mana potion and one elixir~."

"Ok~ay."

After the quiz showdown on stage, Masachika and Alya came to help with the class's project. The committee was expected to be busier tomorrow because of the outside guests, so they thought they would at least help out as much as they could while they still can.

"Kuze-kun~, It looks pretty good on you, huh~?"

"Haha, thanks..... I'm more embarrassed than I thought, though, huh?"

"We've all been down this road, so give it up. I've gotten used to it."

"Quite right, the class chair has a different look.....!"

"Hmph, call me Guildmaster."

The guy with the grinning smile on his face was a big guy from the Judo club. His stout body was clad in an over-decorated coat with a huge collar, and his strong face gave him the air resembling that of a leader of a band of thieves..... Or rather, the head of an adventurer's guild.

(In case you're wondering, the original concept was supposed to be a coffee shop..... Well, think of it as a cosplay coffee shop.)

Chuckling a little at the lack of 'coffee shop elements' in the class restaurant, Masachika pulled out a plastic bottle from the cooler box.

Since the customers are also students of the school, and there was a reasonable number of them, it was relatively easy to take care of the store. Still, he was a little concerned about..... the fact that the robe and pointy hat he wore as a wizard costume would be hotter and more distracting than he expected.

(It rubs on the floor every time I crouch down, it flutters around and gets dusty, and……the brim is too wide, so clearly it's not suitable for customer service.)

Frowning slightly at the robe that clung to his legs at every turn, Masachika placed the paper cup he had poured his drink into on the tray. Then a girl in the class dressed as a female knight carries it to the customer's seat.

(Such a difference in terms of quality……)

Masachika's face became inexplicable as he looked away from them. His cloak was cheap, and while her shield and sword were made of paper and cardboard, the quality of her armor was quite good, as it seems that the elaborate students in the class had taken it quite seriously. Masachika was dressed up as a child at the very least, but that would work well enough as a cosplay. Thanks to this, Masachika subtly narrowed his shoulders. Also, that judo member from earlier? That's not cosplay, but who he was normally.

(Well, I'm in charge of the kitchen, so I don't mind…… By the way, when is Alya coming?)

Since they had the same shift, Alisa also came to the classroom with Masachika. Immediately after that, however, Alya was taken away by three girls from her class who were waiting for her, and she had not returned yet even though it had been more than 15 minutes since her arrival.

(It's already past the start time of the shift…okay? Well, I can totally turn it around if I feel like it.)

Looking around the classroom, students who had come as guests were discussing with difficult looks on their faces, drinks in hand.

"I think the base is ginger ale, but I don't know what it is…… I've had it somewhere before."

"Could this……possibly have cocoa in it? It tastes kind of nostalgic……"

"Hey, I'm tasting something like dried plums in the background…… Is it my imagination?"

“What, seriously?”

What they do is guess the recipe for each drink. The original plan was just to serve drinks, but one of the boys came up with the idea of writing on the back of the menu what was mixed in the drink and asking people to guess what it was while drinking it. There were no prizes for guessing the correct answer, but from the looks of it, it seemed to be a pretty exciting event.

Naturally, if we do this, customers will stay longer and the restaurant’s turnover rate will drop. However, that was not a big problem, as we had originally aimed for a project that did not require much manpower.

(We’re not really aiming for an Award of Excellence or the Special Award..... This is just about right.)

The Award of Excellence is an award given to the most popular project based on a survey by students and visitors. The Special Award is given to the project that generates the most sales. Some classes and clubs were serious about winning these awards, but this time, Masachika’s class was prepared to go through without aiming for it.

(As for the special awards in the first place, you can never beat the places that use their parents’ connections and other people to open ridiculously gorgeous stalls.....)

As Masachika was thinking about this, the classroom door rattled open and an Elf.....entered.

“Huh?”

Masachika expressed a tone so unintentionally stupid that he sounded like an idiot. But it was not only him. The students in the classroom, no matter whether they were customers or class members, looked awestruck and stunned by the sudden appearance of an inhabitant of another world.

“Yes, here you go~!”

There, the female student who was pushing the back of Elf-san, shouted with amusement. Behind them, the two other girls who

abducted Alisa appeared and looked amused at the reaction in the classroom.

“Aha, what a good response~!”

“It was worth the effort……!”

“We worked so hard……”

The three girls seemed to have done it all. Masachika fearfully approached the Elf, who had a mixed expression of embarrassment and shame on her face, and called out to her.

“……Alya?”

Alisa, aka Elf-san, turned her head for a moment at Masachika’s words and then quickly turned away. Her ears were long and pointed, poking out from between her silver hair, and she was dressed in a white and green one-piece dress. That’s about it as far as cosplay goes, and she doesn’t seem to be wearing any makeup or anything like that, but if Alisa, who has even just an ubiquitous beauty, dresses like that, she’s going to be……

(No, she doesn’t look like a full-fledged human being.)

Even so, she had a “foreign face that Japanese people can easily get used to,” as if she were a two-dimensional inhabitant. There, with ears perked up and dressed in an otherworldly outfit, she was now a full-blown elf. How can such a beautiful girl be human?

【I took a brave step forward and arrived in a… different world…】

And then Alisa’s cynical Russian, with a downcast and slightly distant look in her eyes, reached his ears, and Masachika came back to himself. He cleared his throat lightly and called out to Alisa again.

“You look great…… Wow, you look beautiful.”

As soon as Masachika said that, the three female students who had abducted Alya made a teasing “hoo~♪” sound. But soon after, students in the classroom came rushing in, making no distinction between customers and servers, and they quickly went up to them.

“Wow, that’s a real elf! It’s a real elf!”

“This is so unfair..... We Japanese will never win something like this.”

“Can I take a picture?! Just one picture!”

Standing in front of the boys, who swarmed around them, the three girls looked menacing with their thug-like expressions.

“Don’t come any closer!”

“Don’t take a picture of her! No, we are not going to take your money!”

“Don’t you know the basic rules of cosplay? You’ll be kicked out of the venue if you take a picture without permission!”

.....In case you were wondering, they were supposed to be innocent daughters from good families. They were definitely not the kind of girls who would usually talk like this. Looking at Alisa’s appearance here, perhaps they had an extraordinary obsession when it comes to cosplay.

(What does that mean? Could it be that all three of them are in the crafts club? Oh.....that makes sense. There were a lot of passionate.....people there.)

Masachika’s eyes were a little distant as he recalled the past with the handicraft club. Then Alisa glanced at Masachika, shyly covering her ears with her hands.

“Oh, don’t look at me too much, it’s..... embarrassing.”

“.....No, if you’re embarrassed by that quality, what about me?”

At these words, Alya also looked at Masachika’s pointy hat and robe and raised the corners of her mouth a little.

“Well..... It’s good, isn’t it?”

“Isn’t it ridiculous?”

“That’s not true, okay? And if you had a wand with a star on the end, it would be perfect.”

“This isn’t a playground.”

At Masachika's response, Alya put her hand over her mouth and let out a giggle. The boys who had gathered around her excitedly opened their mouths as if their souls had been drained by her soft smile.

"Ah, Princess Alya is smiling……"

"Eh, so cute!"

"I thought she'd be colder since she's the 'ice princess'…… but she's even laughing."

"No, no, no, senpai! Isn't this rare!?"

After a moment of silence, the stunned and surprised voices overflowed. When Alisa looked a little amused by them, she raised her eyebrows and tried to adjust her expression. The three girls of the handicrafts club quickly shooed away the boys, who groaned "Oh……" with disappointment. With this scene at her side, Alya looked down at her own body and muttered to herself.

"I don't know much about elves to begin with. …… What kind of character are they?"

"They aren't characters, they're a race. It is one of the common races that appear in fantasy worlds. They are a race of long-eared creatures that live with nature in the forest, both the males and females are beautiful, and although they live for hundreds of years, their outer growth stops when they are in their 20s. They are proud and closed-minded, and do not get along well with humans."

"……so."

Masachika, who had been casually explaining the situation, noticed that Alya's voice was a little depressed when he answered, and he hastened to explain. He glanced at the three girls from the handicraft club behind him and quickly followed up with a whisper.

"Oh, hey…… I don't think that cosplay was chosen because you have an elf-like personality or anything like that. I think it's simply because Elves are usually representative of a beautiful foreign race…… Elves are vegetarians, they don't like anything made from metal, and they're good with bows, so they are totally different from you—"

"……? What?"

Alya looked at Masachika, who suddenly kept his mouth shut, suspiciously. While averting his gaze to escape her eyes, Masachika quickly made a fool of himself.

“No, to begin with..... elves also have pale blonde hair, right? So I really don’t think there’s any deep meaning to it, you know?”

It was a pretty painful misconception on Masachika’s part. But he couldn’t help it. He couldn’t say, “All the good old royal elves are slender-bodied!” And of course he couldn’t say that glamorous elves are commonly referred to as “eroelves”[1] or.....

(Well, elves are great with bows and..... in that sense they have big breasts, right?)

“.....What, are you thinking of something weird?”

“No? Why? Well, I’m getting restless and I’m ready to get back to work.”

Then, turning away casually, Masachika returned to his post. Looking suspiciously at his back, Alisa turned to attract customers at the entrance. And.....

“What, an Elf?”

“Hey, this way, this way!”

“Woah, that’s amazing.”

“Excuse me, can I take your picture?”

Within a minute, there was a traffic jam in the hallway and Alisa was managed by the three girls. Then, the traffic jam turned directly into a line waiting to enter the store, and the store quickly became a shuraba.[2]

“You’ve got a lot of people all at once..... Guildmaster, what will you do about this?”

When Masachika asked the “Guildmaster” about this, he laughed and said, “I’m sorry, but I’m not sure what to do about this.”

“...what shall we do?”

“Well, should we offer an option to take out drinks……?”

“There’s no lid on a paper cup, and it’s useless because they’re all here for Alya in the first place.”

“Oh, I see, you need a lid or it would spill…… Well, shall we add more seats?”

“Shouldn’t there be a queue and a time limit before that?”

“Kuze! You are in charge!”

“Oh!”

When Masachika clicked his tongue at his hesitant roundaboutness, Guildmaster put his hand on Masachika’s shoulder with gentle eyes.

“Kuze… From today on, you are the Deputy Guildmaster.”

“Oh, so typical of an adventure guild’s Guildmaster, eh? A strong man who can’t do any paperwork, no?”

“Nice to meet you, Deputy Guildmaster!”

“”””Nice to meet you!!”””

“You guys!”

Masachika glared at Guildmaster and his classmates, who immediately got on board with Guildmaster’s idea to try to force him into a managerial position, but…… they all had a blank look on their faces. Even Alisa looked away with a slightly awkward expression on her face.

(Oi, candidate for student body president… Well, this is the type of work I’m good at anyway.)

With that in mind, Masachika began to lead the class.

“So, for the time being, we’ll have a ten minute limit after people take a seat…… Let the line organizer have a card saying so, and you three…. Don’t run off~? Take responsibility and help you out, okay?”

He stopped the three girls of the handicraft club, who were about to leave hurriedly, saying, “What? We’re not in charge of the store at this

time of day?" and sent one to the line, one to time management, and one to guard Alisa.

"Oh, time management… Don't you have a timer? Managing six seats by yourself with just one smartphone…"

"You can record the time they got to their seats and calculate it from there."

"Unexpected super analogue skill!"

And so, with some hiccups, they restructured their customer service methods before the complaints went up. However, the students in the line were staring at Alisa through the corridor window, so there might have been no way to raise any complaints.

"Yo, Kuze. You guys have something great here."

"Oh, thank you. Is this a basketball club gathering?"

"Yeah, we're taking a break together."

Masachika greeted an upperclassman he knew who called out to him, clutching his hat. Then, the members of the basketball team, who had taken their seats together, approached Masachika with friendly smiles on their faces.

"I was watching the quiz competition."

"That was a pretty awesome match! When the tables turned at the end, I couldn't help but let out a squeal."

"Thank you."

"Kujou-san was so cool!"

"Eh, oh, thank you."

Alisa, who was busy serving customers, was surprised by the sudden praise. Not seeming to mind Alisa's awkward bow, the basketball club enthusiastically expressed their impressions of the quiz showdown.

"No, seriously, it was amazing. I tried to take the quiz too, and couldn't even guess half of the questions."

“Oh~ yeah. He was so confident that he was going to win, and yet he’s the sole loser. Thanks to that, he’s the one who’s going to pay the bill here.”

“Kujou-san got so many questions right on the stage. She’s amazing after all”

“No really, congratulations again on winning the quiz showdown!”

Then one of them began to clap, and another boy at the table followed him with a finger whistle and applause. In addition, students from other seats began to applaud and congratulate her, and the whole classroom was filled with applause and cheers.

“Oh, uh…”

Suddenly, Alisa was met with favorable glances from all directions, and after flinching for a few moments, she bowed silently. Alisa looked completely at a loss for a response and repeatedly bowed her head while pursing[3] her shoulders. The classroom was filled with a warm atmosphere by her fresh and innocent appearance, which was a complete change from her dignified appearance on stage.

“……Kujou-san, have you changed?”

“Right? I don’t know her personally, but don’t you think she’s more friendly than we thought?”

“……Alya has always been like that. It’s just that because of her looks, people have been so hesitant to be around her until now.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. That’s why she doesn’t have a high sense of communication herself, but if she speaks normally with others, she can have a normal conversation?”

The basketball club members nodded surprisingly to the casual follow-up from Masachika.

“He~h, I see. I was wondering if you were the only exception because you are the ghost of communication.”

“Who’s the ghost of communication?”

“You are.”

“I think it’s more of that, you can’t get along with people well?”

“Don’t talk to your senpai in a casual way.”

“Huh? Did I do something wrong? Ow, it hurts.”

As soon as he showed a mocking face, he was silently shoved around by the seniors, and Masachika fled to the kitchen (aka the drink storage area). A few minutes later, the corridor suddenly became noisy. As he was worried about it while preparing drinks, the cause of the disturbance soon appeared at the entrance.

“Oh my..... Are you sure about this, folks? I’m sorry...”

“Go ahead! We would rather watch it here!”

Pushed forward by the students in line was Yuki, dressed in a miniature yukata with frills on the sleeves and collar. Her black hair, pulled back in side-tails with a large hair ornament, matched her rather cute outfit.

Yuki, who looked like a doll, and Alisa, who looked like a figurine, met. The classroom was filled with tension as the two, who just a few moments ago were engaged in a heated battle on stage, faced each other.

Amidst the tremendous density of gazes, Yuki was the first to open her mouth.

“Well, Alya-san, you look very beautiful. You look like a fairy.”

“Thanks.. Yuki, you look great too!”

“Really? Thank you very much.”

“Is that a costume for a show? Yuki’s class had a performance, didn’t they?”

“That’s right. It was troublesome to change clothes, so I wore them to promote my class.”

Masachika didn’t sense any particular feud, but rather a friendly conversation. However, those around them watched the exchange between the two with bated breaths.

He didn't know if they were aware of the people around them… or maybe they were aware of it. Rather, Yuki talked to Alisa with a smile as if she was purposely showing it to others.

"Still, it was a good showdown earlier. I never thought it would be reversed on the final question…… I was on the losing side for a bit at the start too, but it was very dramatic!"

"What? Oh, is that right?"

Alisa nodded vaguely, apparently at a loss for a response. As the winner, she probably doesn't know how she should treat Yuki, the loser. As if seeing through Alisa's inner thoughts, Yuki giggled.

"I'll be in trouble if you act so awkwardly. You should be proud of yourselves, because this was the result of both of you giving your best, in a fair and honest manner."

"Umm, yeah……"

Even so, it was impossible to be proud in the face of the loser. Yuki smiled at Alisa, who nodded vaguely, not seeming to mind. Just looking at them here, it was almost impossible to tell which was the winner and which was the loser. And in fact, I think that was what Yuki had in mind.

This was true in all competitions, but the post-match response that would increase the likeability of the loser was to gracefully admit defeat and praise the winner.

On the other hand, spitting out sighs of defeat, or being blatantly frustrated and not shaking hands with your opponents would be counterproductive. Yuki knew this, which was probably why she came to see Alisa herself as soon as the confrontation was over.

(In addition, even though she lost the game, she still showed a generous attitude and appealed to the public as a big shot…… I think this one-on-one is a little too much for Alya.)

That said, if Masachika were to blatantly follow up on Alisa at this point, it could conversely lower Alisa's standing. So Masachika called on the female student in charge of time management, instead of either one of them, to break off what was happening once and for all.

“Table three, isn’t it time?”

“Huh? Oh, ho, that’s true. Um, excuse me. It’s time, so could you give up your seat?”

The students sitting at table three were asked to leave the room at a very interesting point, and were reluctant to leave their seats as they voiced their dissatisfaction with the situation, saying “Oh no~.” Soon after, the girl dressed as a knight quickly wiped the desk, and guided Yuki to her seat.

“Thank you very much. Excuse me, may I ask Alya to serve me?”

“Ah——”

“Of course it’s fine! In fact, sit together!”

“Huh?”

Interrupting Alisa’s reply, the girl in charge of guarding her pulled a chair next to Yuki and forced Alisa to sit down mid-sentence. She was kind of like a club mom who encouraged her new girl, who has been nominated by a client, to pour a glass of wine for them.

“Ho…… Fufu.”

The three girls of the handicrafts club were so enraptured by the two girls that they forced them to sit side by side. However, they were not the only ones entranced; the students in the classroom and in the hallway were all gazing at the two beautiful girls sitting side by side.

“Well, my job——”

“I’ll take care of that! Suou-san, which drink would you like?”

Interrupting Alisa’s comment, the girl in charge of guarding Yuki showed Yuki the menu. Then Yuki took one glanced at the menu and said with a smile,

“Well… Can I have a glass of milk?”

At that moment, there was a tense atmosphere among the students in Class B, except for Masachika and Alisa.

As Masachika blinked at the sudden and mysterious tension, Guildmaster slowly moved in front of Yuki, put his hands on the table and made a terrific sound.

“Ojou-chan... This is a bar, isn’t it? If you want some milk, go home and drink some of your mom’s milk.”

“No, this isn’t a bar, is it……?”

Yuki looked back at Guildmaster with a smile on her face, as Masachika who could not keep up with the mysterious development muttered a tsukkomi. Her small stature stood out as she confronted the big Guildmaster, but she didn’t seem to be intimidated at all.

“My mother died on a beautiful moonlit night.”

“No, she’s not dead...”

Guildmaster smiled wryly at Yuki’s response and pulled out a wooden box from a locker in the back of the classroom. Placing it in front of Yuki, Guildmaster himself sat back in his chair with a thud.

Then, with a pompous motion, he opened the wooden box and found an elaborately decorated single glass bottle.

“Alright dear lovely customer…… Here’s what you want.”

“Hold on a second.”

Unable to resist the unheard-of development and the unseen glass bottle, Masachika pulled Guildmaster on his shoulder. Yeah, his big collar was a nuisance.

“Hey, what’s this?”

“Come on, Kuze…… You know the promise of a bar in another world with a backstory, don’t you?”

“That’s why it’s not a bar.”

After glaring at his classmates, who were shaking their heads in agreement with Guildmaster and saying, “Whew, dear,” Masachika looked at Alisa’s expression and confirmed that she was on the same side as him.

“I mean…… just like at the last tasting, seriously, what’s with leaving out Alya and I with the details? Don’t tell me you’re dealing with something that would be dangerous if the student council knew about it?”

“That’s not the case, is it? Of course it’s legal, it’s legal.”

“That’s what someone who would deal with stuff that’s forbidden by law would say! I mean, at least deny it doesn’t have anything bad in it!”

“It does not have hazardous materials.”

“What is it, then?”

“An animal?”

“An animal!?”

The mystery deepened, but Masachika put the question aside for the moment and turned his attention to Yuki.

“I mean, that code phrase from earlier that I don’t know either? How do you know that?”

“I heard about it through rumors. If you say a certain phrase here, you can have a mysterious drink.”

“……Oh, is that so…”

Yuki, with her wide circle of friends, must have picked up the rumor somewhere. That’s all right, but what bothered Masachika was whether it was really a harmless drink. After all, Masachika himself had a hard time with a prototype drink they had asked him to test.

“Hey Guildmaster, are you sure there are no weird side effects or anything?”

“Well, I guess that’s my responsibility. All I do is provide what they ask for…”

When Guildmaster answered him without breaking eye contact, Masachika asked again, putting his hand onto his shoulder.

“It’s harmless, right?”

“Oh, yes. No harm is intended.”

Guildmaster, succumbing to the pressure of an overprotective older brother, nodded his head with a plain expression and looked at Masachika with probing eyes for a while, who finally let go of his hand from his shoulder.

Then Guildmaster poured the contents of the bottle into a shot glass in the crate and placed it in front of Yuki. Then, when he cleared his throat and went back into character, he said in a pretentious tone.

“Now, here’s our back-up drink..... Amrita[4].”

At first glance, it was a transparent liquid that looked like water. No one had any idea what ingredients they had mixed to achieve this clarity.

While both Masachika and Alisa looked dubious, Yuki picked up the shot glass and said, “Bon appétit!”

With that said, she slurped the contents in one bold gulp.

Then she opened her eyes wide.

“This is...! This aroma is reminiscent of a majestic autumn sky, and this richness is as if the bounty of the earth had been condensed. If I could describe it with a word, it would be...”

Staring intently at the empty shot glass, Yuki took a long pause before muttering,

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

It seems that it was nothing.

◇

“I’m on break for a while, but when will Alya start taking a break? If you want, we can walk around together.”

“Well, I—”

Yuki’s question was answered faster than Alisa could answer it as one of the handicraft club members interrupted,

“Going outside!? Then, Kujou-san, why don’t you go and advertise our class in that outfit?”

“It has to be now since the corridor is completely congested. Think of it as an early break. If Suou-san is with you, the publicity will be perfect! Oh, if you like, Kuze-kun should follow, too.”

“Is that okay? Guildmaster.”

“Oh , well…”

“”””?”””

“Yeah, okay!”

The three girls, who forcibly asked for permission with a face that should not be shown as girls, then turned to Masakika.

“So, Kuze, why don’t you dress up a little better? It’s a good opportunity for you.”

“What, you still have something else?”

“Yup. Which do you prefer, an aristocrat or an orc?”

“Don’t mix them up with the elves, they’re both dangerous!”

“Well, let’s just go and think about it.”

In the blink of an eye, Masachika was taken away and Alisa and Yuki were left behind. Alisa asked Yuki, feeling a little uncomfortable with the passionate stares she continued to receive from those around her.

“Well, it sounds like we could go around together…… Is there somewhere you’d like to go?”

“Well… How about some of your friend’s classes? Are there any places you want to go, Alya?”

“I’m not that…”

“Is that so? Oh, by the way, it seems that Masha and Sarashina’s class is having a magical bar.”

“Oh, my……”

Alisa laughed a little sarcastically at Yuki’s words.

“I wonder if Sarashina-senpai, or…… Masha, can do magic?”

“Hmmm…you’re right, I can’t imagine it. I can’t really imagine Masha doing card tricks vividly.”

“Can’t you cut her some slack?”

Yuki said, a little embarrassed by Alisa’s relentless evaluation of her family member. Then, with a slight shrug, Alisa suddenly remembered something, looked at her and asked in a low voice.

“What about Yuki?”

“Huh?”

“You told me before that you have a brother. I wondered what kind of person he was.”

After casually asking this, Alisa held back with a jolt. She remembered she heard that Yuki’s brother had left their home and now lived somewhere else. She didn’t know the situation, but maybe it was something that shouldn’t be taken lightly.

“Oh, well, I wish I could tell you…”

When Alisa looked like she regretted asking, Yuki smiled reassuringly.

“Hmmm, you don’t have to worry so much about it, okay? My brother and I have a very good relationship.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Yes. Well… What kind of person is he…?

After tilting her head slightly and letting her gaze wander diagonally upward, Yuki put her hand over her mouth and let out a chuckle. Then, looking up at Alisa's face sideways, she said.

"Well, he's a very cute person, isn't he?"

"Cute, huh?"

"Yes, I think Alya would like him."

"Yeah~....."

Alisa, who thought that he would have a reputation for being a "kind person" or a "reliable person," twitched her cheek at a completely unexpected personality review.

(Cute... Even though he's a man, she says he's cute...)

In her mind, she can picture several faces of idols who were marketed as "cute guys." From Alisa's point of view, who preferred solid, independent people of both sexes, their mockingly flirtatious behavior was more of a turn-off.....

(No, but still, a brother who is told he is cute by his sister is.....)

The next image that popped into Alisa's brain was of a boy who, like Yuki, was small and slender, like a chihuahua. Alisa frowned a little as she imagined the scene of the unreliably plump boy being teased by Yuki.

I don't know if she was a mocking type or a shameless type, but either way, she thought he was far from Alisa's taste.

(I'm sorry Yuki, but.....I don't think we would get along very well.)

However, it would not be a problem, as it would be unlikely she would have the opportunity to meet Yuki's brother. Thinking so, Alisa laughed vaguely.

"Well, it's nice that you guys get along."

"Yes, I hope I can introduce him to Alya someday."

"Well... I'll look forward to it."

Yuki smiled meaningfully as she squeezed out her social etiquette to the best of her ability. Alisa casually averted her gaze, feeling as if she had somehow been seen through by her.

(Even so, I wonder if Yuki likes cute boys? ……I just don't get it.)

Alisa thought about it, pretending not to notice Yuki's smiling gaze. And then,

"Sorry for the wait!"

At the right moment, she heard the voice of a female student who had taken Masachika with her, and Alisa turned her head in that direction, hoping for the best.

Then, what she saw was a pair of red pumpkin pants.[5]

"Pfft!"

"Ku-ku."

"Hey~ this is how it's supposed to~ be!"

Alisa and Yuki quickly covered their mouths and turned their heads away, and Masachika, dressed like a prince in a picture book, looked at them with dismay. Alisa and Yuki couldn't hold back their laughter as they became even more and more out of touch with the situation.

"Hmph, hmph, yes, I think it looks good on you, don't you think?"

"Stop making fun of me, you're making a fool of yourself"

"That's not true, is it? Right, Alya?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah."

When Yuki asked her to talk, Alisa also looked at Masachika and turned her face away from him……seeing that he looked like he belonged more to a playground than before.

"～～～～～pfft!!"

"Hey, stop! I'm going to be hurt now! Hey, hey, hey! Did you just take my picture?"

His face was red and his eyes glared at them, but he only looked like a selfish prince who was getting angry because of his appearance. Alisa smiled wickedly and muttered, laughing more and more at the sight of him.

【Cu~te ♡】

[1]: Originally, the raws said “エロフとか” which is a play on words by joining the words “erotic” and “elves”. It’s often used to describe the genre of art depicting elves in erotic drawings or settings.

[2]: Shuraba (修羅場), meaning “Fighting scene” or “Scene of carnage.”

[3]: Pursing, which means to (with reference to the lips) pucker or contract, typically to express disapproval or irritation.

[4]: Amrita is a mystical elixir in Indian mythology which grants immortality to the consumer.

[5]: Pumpkin pants are pants which are goofy, baggy pants which clowns, jesters or princes in fairy tales might usually wear.

Chapter 2 - An Otaku's Romance

"So, where shall we go first?"

After returning to cosplay as a wizard, Masachika responded to Yuki's words.

"I want to go somewhere to eat. I haven't had lunch yet..... Alya too, right?"

"Eh? Yes....."

The time was already past 14:30, but Masachika and Alisa had not yet eaten lunch. Before the quiz showdown, the executive committee was busy with work, and after the quiz showdown, the afterglow of excitement and tension remained, so they didn't have much of an appetite.

"I see. After the quiz showdown, I only had a light meal, so let's go to a restaurant where we can eat well, shall we?"

"Then... How about there? There's a line."

What Masachika looked at was a joint project between Class D and F, which had an incredible presence. Surprisingly, it was a maid cafe that used the three classes from Class D to F. Class F's classroom was used as a changing and cooking room, while Class D and E's classrooms were used as halls. By the way, if you're asking where Class E went, they had a stall project in the school yard. As a result of some queen's selfishness, saying, "If you want to have a maid cafe, you have to listen to Sayachii~," there was a rumor that Class E gave in to the pressure of the queen of the school and the debating queen and were kicked out~. In particular, there had been no complaints from Class E, so it was just a rumor.

"Sounds good. I'm a little curious, too."

"I don't mind."

With their agreement, Masachika got in line to wait for their turn. Perhaps it was fortunate that it was past lunchtime, but they didn't have to wait long for our turn.

"Welcome back, master, miss."

"Ah, oh."

A rather cute maid, who was also in charge of line management, bowed reverently to him, and Masachika was a little taken aback by the unexpected authenticity of the event.

"Masachika-kun, your face is looking a little loose, isn't it?"

"No, that's not the case."

【Careless……】

(Stop the irrefutable name-calling.)

Immediately, both of them pointed it out, and Masachika felt a little uneasy and pressed his mouth with his hand. Then the maid in front of him chuckled.

(Oh, shit.)

Under his hands, he found himself making a genuine smile with his mouth.

(Huh? What's this? Maybe……I have a greater weakness for maids than I thought!?)

Masachika thought he was used to being with a maid, as he was usually in the presence of a maid in his own right, Ayano…… But apparently, he was mistaken.

(Well, it's not good…… If this is the case from the entrance, I might get all freaked out when I go inside. That's too much in front of these two!)

Yuki would tease him for the rest of his life, and Alisa would look at him with the utmost contempt. As Masachika was struck by a sense of unexpected danger, the maid, with a smile tucked away, gestured with her hand to the Class D classroom.

“Please come this way. By the way, when you move to the next classroom, you have to pay 200 yen for your seat.”

“Oh, okay.”

Masachika smiled unconsciously at the pretty maid’s remarkable business practices.

If you look at it, the windows on the corridor side of the two classrooms were completely covered with dark curtains, so you couldn’t see what’s going on inside. In other words, you had no idea what kind of maids were inside. If you didn’t find the maid you were looking for in the classroom that you were guided to, you would pay to go to the next classroom. Harsh.

(Yeah, alright. Retract my smile, yup, yikes.)

Masachika managed to regain his composure and stood in front of the sliding door. He adjusted his mind as he opened..... the sliding door, so that no matter what kind of maid came to the door, he wouldn’t look disheveled.

“Welcome home~♡ Master♡ Miss♡.”
A beautiful maid, who seemed to have a sound effect of “sharara la la la ♪”[1] gave a perfect welcome. She had a fluffy miniskirt that wrapped around her hips in a high position. Her long, slender white legs stretched from there. Her childish twin-tail hairstyle with loose waves went well with her innocent smile. It was an incredibly beautiful maid that you won’t see often in real maid cafes. At this, even the quintessential Masachika couldn’t help but think,

“Ooooh!”

He didn’t know what to do. Because the maid was Nonoa. That was all.

“? What’s the matter? Master♡.”

Masachika’s cheeks twitched at Nonoa’s appearance, who was behaving far from her usual character.

“Oh my~, even a lovely elf lady. It really suits you♡”

“Oh, yeah, thanks?”

Even Alisa was slightly taken back, her eyes wide with surprise.

“Thank you for welcoming us. Nonoa-san, it suits you very well, doesn’t it?”

On the other hand, Yuki, who was in her ojou-sama mode, was unfazed by all this. She praised Nonoa without hesitation, without losing a trace of her elegant smile. Then Nonoa intertwined the fingers of both her hands and placed them on her chin, wriggling and shying away.

“Oh~, really~? I’m so happy♡.”

...and with a tone that made a “haha♡” sound effect.

“Oh, boo.”

“……”

Masachika got a heartburn from what he thought was a creepy sight. Alisa stopped thinking because of the gap Nonoa had with her normal attitude. However, Nonoa didn’t seem to mind such a reaction from her bandmates (in fact, she probably didn’t care), and led the three to their seats with a beautiful wink.

“Oh, uh, can we order?”

“Oh, yes♡.”

Then, as soon as Masachika and the others were seated, she was called to another table, and Nonoa headed that way. Apparently, Masachika and the others who felt nothing but discomfort with Nonoa’s character were in the minority, and that every other male customer in the classroom seemed to be captivated by Nonoa. In the middle of receiving the order, you could see that their eyes were glued to Nonoa’s thin waist and white thighs peeping through the hem of her skirt.

Of course, Nonoa was aware of this, as she worked as a model to a certain extent. She seemed completely comfortable and unconcerned about being seen. On the contrary,

“Mou~, Master? Where are you looking?”

“Oh, no, no, nowhere....”

She even made room for a mischievous “meh.” The boys at the table were embarrassed, but their mouths were relaxed.

“She’s scaring me.”

Masachika objected again. Then, a female student dressed in a classical maid’s outfit approached them, a complete change from Nonoa’s Akiba-like[2] maid’s outfit.

“Are you ready to order?”

Looking at her, Masachika’s mouth involuntarily gaped and a phrase came out of his mouth.

“Whoa, the c-chief maid……”

“? I’m the chief maid, but what about it?”

Sayaka, who didn’t seem to mind the three cosplayers, lifted the temples of her glasses while raising one eyebrow a little. Unlike the maids around her, her customer service attitude lacked any flirtatious charm. Her maid’s uniform had a long skirt with few decorations, and she wore glasses that shone with a cool-headed light, carrying a dignity that set her apart from ordinary maids.

“May I take your order?”

“Let’s see. Then, the ‘maid’s loving meat sauce.’”

“Our recommendation is curry rice!”

“Ha?”

“I recommend the curry rice.”

The chief maid refused the order in a gentle manner. With her cheeks twitching, he had no choice but to follow the recommendation.

“……it’s because pasta is a pain to cook, right?”

“Oh, you’re spot on.”

“Of course I’ll know. Who do you think checks the food system?”

Because of the health department’s regulations regarding the provision of food at school festivals, everything was checked in advance

to ensure that there were no problems with the cooking process. Masachika knew this because he was involved in the checking process, as while curry rice can be simply served on lentil rice, pasta was a bit more time-consuming because you had to boil dried noodles. And well, simply..... Curry rice had a lower cost ratio. I mean, to put it bluntly,

"No..... The curry is expensive, isn't it? Even if it's homemade, it's still 1,000 yen at a school festival."

No matter how many rich students attend the school festival at Seirei Gakuen, it was hard to see four-figure prices for a single item. He didn't care if it was a super expensive coffee or something, curry was still curry, no matter how much "handmade" value it may have added. As for pricing, it could only be said that it was too aggressive. But there was no way that this chief maid could have set this price without thinking.

"Take a closer look. There will be a drawing for a chance to win a photograph with the maids."

"A photograph? Oh....."

Masachika himself had never been to a maid cafe, but he had heard that some stores offered to take a photograph of you with a maid if you collected enough points. The fact that the curry rice came with a lottery was rather reminiscent of a handshake ticket for some idol.....

"By the way, what is the probability of winning?"

"Master, that's a maid's secret."

"Oh, you called me master, I was wondering if you'd do that....."

That was rather surprising. At Masachika's unintentional outburst, Sayaka lowered her gaze and silently lifted her glasses before continuing.

"...don't worry. It's the proper way to address you."

"Oh, yes. Well, don't worry too much about that——"

"Sorry! One more Lucky Curry over here! Without curry and rice!"

"For me too!"

“Okay~, here is the raffle ticket for the drawing~.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I think I just heard a very dark exchange.”

“It must be your imagination.”

“It’s not just my imagination! Look! Look at the eyes of the boys around there! They’re all addicted to gambling!!”

“We are not forcing anything on them. We simply do as our masters wish.”

“Damn, what an irrefutable excuse……”

As expected, she was the former queen of debates afterall. Masachika was impressed by Sayaka’s cool, composed attitude. Then Yuki nodded in admiration.

“I see…… They compensate for the low turnover rate of in-store eating and drinking by raising the price per customer in this way.”

“That’s just you and your nasty analysis…… It’s a maid cafe, but not like the ones from my dreams.”

“Master, aren’t you dreaming too much about maid cafes?”

“I don’t like this maid!”

Screaming at the chief maid who was mercilessly crushing his dreams, Masachika ordered curry, since he didn’t care if he didn’t win the lottery that came with it. Yuki and Alisa followed suit and ordered curry rice and drinks for three.

“Then, please wait a moment.”

After Sayaka bowed her head and left, Masachika looked around the restaurant again. What was surprising was that all the female staff in the store wore maid uniforms, all of which were of a different design.

“It seems like it cost a lot of money just to pay for the costumes… That’s why the interior is so simple.”

“I don’t know who I heard it from, but apparently the maid uniforms were rented through a student’s friend. It was a pretty cheap rental rate.”

“Oh, as expected of their treasurer.”

When Alisa’s complement brought his gaze back, she looked back at Masachika with cold eyes.

“But still..... Masachika, do you like that kind of thing?”

“What? Oh, no, I mean, It’s not like I like maids... I just think their uniforms are cute. Like an otaku?”

“Hmmm~?”

“In that case, at the entrance with, was it..... Mizoguchi-san? You seemed to be grinning a lot, weren’t you?”

“No, I didn’t mean to grin.....”

“That’s how it looked to me too.”

Masachika was at a loss for words when even Alisa chimed in. In all honesty, Masachika didn’t have such a guilty feeling... but when he was worrying about how to justify it, Yuki chuckled...

“I’m just kidding. I was just teasing you a little. Masachika-kun, you don’t take much interest in people you don’t know, do you?”

“That’s a misleading way of saying it, but... Well, I guess so.”

At Yuki’s words, Masachika nodded with a slight chuckle.

In fact, Masachika did not have much interest in members of the opposite sex that he did not usually interact with. It was the same feeling as watching idols and actresses on TV. He would have impressions such as “cute,” “pretty,” and “good-looking,” but he wouldn’t really want to get close to or touch them. Although such feelings may arise as a result of some form of interaction with them. In fact, when he first met Alisa, he just thought, “What a beautiful girl!” and didn’t really plan on getting along with her. The only exception was Maria... no, Maa-chan.

(Now that I think about it... Maybe it was what you would call love at first sight.)

While thinking about that, Yuki whispered to Alisa in front of him,

“Alya-san, Masachika-kun is thinking of another woman in front of us.”

“I knew it. Somehow I thought so too.”

“Hey, what’s with that woman’s intuition, really?”

Masachika turned his tired eyes on the two girls who were reading his mind somewhat breathlessly. However, Alisa pursued a question in a cold voice without answering him.

“So? Who were you thinking of?”

“……Ayano. Because she’s a maid”

“Hmm~. Well, Kimishima-san is pretty cute, isn’t she?”

“……I think Alya would be absolutely adorable in maid clothes.”

After saying this to put her in a good mood, Masachika suddenly tilted his head.

“Huh? Alya…… Have you ever had a chance to wear maid clothes before?”

“…You must be imagining things. Aren’t you mistaken for something?”

“What~……? I see, I must be mistaken……”

When Masachika nodded his head, feeling a little unaccountable, Yuki laughed a little mischievously.

“So Masachika-kun likes a maid’s uniform. I’ll try it on next time, too.”

“Oh~, why don’t you just do whatever you want?”

“……Masachika-kun, haven’t you been treating me a little too roughly lately?”

“No, because when you dress cute…… huh?”

Seeing Masachika say so with a slight furrow of his brow, Alisa looked at him a little reproachfully, but with a slight hint of superiority in her expression. However,

“I’d love it, and I even would take pictures.”

“No, I can’t believe Masachika loves you that much…… That’s bold.”

“No, I’m kidding? Alya? I’m just kidding, okay?”

Masachika tried convincing Alisa, whose eyes became as cold as a hundred tundras in an instant. Of course, he was not kidding. On days Yuki wore cute maid clothes, Masachika would always take a lot of pictures and loved it very much. If he admitted that here though, it would only be problematic, so he’ll just call it a joke.

Then Alisa turned away with a slightly dissatisfied look while saying, “I wonder if that’s the case”, perhaps convinced. Masachika laughed at this behavior, which no longer hid her fondness for him at all.

(Well, this much can be interpreted as jealousy of a friend’s partner.)

【You never even look at me like that.】

(I can’t do that…… She wants me to see her as a girl to the fullest, doesn’t she?)

What does it really mean if the person herself was not aware of this?

(I wonder…… Does she mean, “I want my partner to always see me first!”. Is that the idea? But I already like Alya the best……)

While he was thinking, the chief maid brought curry rice and drinks for three people.

“Here you go, ‘Made by hand, Lucky Curry.’”

“Oh, thank you.”

After serving the food and drinks at the table, Sayaka brought a box with a hole at the top.

“And here’s the lottery.”

“Yeah, it was creating a lot of ruckus moments ago……”

“Excuse me. The masters over there just happened to be out of luck.”

“I wonder if it’s really a matter of luck.”

He didn’t bother to count, but Masachika was sure that five or six people had given up on their responsibilities. If you listened carefully, you could hear anguished voices saying, “Next time……” or “But no more…….”, followed by Nonoa’s sweet voice, “Master, would you like another drink?”. As long as they were sitting down, they were enticed into spending more money even when they were worried. It was resilient.

(It was also sad to be declined with a “bad luck” after that……)

With that in mind, Masachika drew the lottery. When he opened the folded paper, he found the word “winner” on it.

“What?”

“See, it was a matter of luck, wasn’t it?”

Smiling out of the corner of her mouth, Sayaka raised her voice so that it echoed throughout the classroom.

“Congratulations! He’s won the photograph prize!”

At these words, the boys who were about to get up and say, “I think I’ll give up after all……” turned around with a grimace. Then Nonoa immediately called out to them.

“Would you like a refill~?”

“I’ll have one. Oh, and one more Lucky Curry!”

“Ugh~…… Me too!”

“Ah, the poor bastards are back in the gambling swamp……”

If you think about it rationally, the fact that one winning lottery ticket had just been won means that the odds of winning were less than they were a few minutes ago. Surely they were no longer capable of making such rational decisions. Or perhaps they are also very unforgiving of the fact that a random guy had just won.

(Hmm? Wait a minute. Now that I think about it… Is it really a coincidence that I won the lottery?)

Masachika did not think so. He thought…… that him hitting the jackpot here and now could not have been a better situation to rekindle the other customer's buying interest. He suspected so, as the other lottery tickets were tightly folded, but the one Masachika took was folded in a lax way and was easy to grab……

"Oh, I lost."

"Me too……"

Masachika stared intently into Sayaka's face as Yuki and Alisa placed their blank lottery tickets on the table. However, Sayaka asked Masachika with a quiet smile that did not reveal any inner feelings.

"Then, master, which girl would you like to have your picture taken with?"

"Huh? Oh, come on."

"By the way, the most popular is Nonoa."

"No, she——"

"I knew it. Nonoa! It's your choice!"

"You're not listening to me, chief maid!"

"Yes♡. Would you like to appoint me? Master♡"

"……"

Masachika turned a cold eye on Nonoa, who was still squealing as usual. However, Nonoa would have noticed it of course, but she went through it brilliantly.

"Then, Master, please come this way♡"

Then, Nonoa stood in front of the blackboard behind the classroom. There were hearts, flowers, ribbons, and other brightly colored chalk drawings, making it a sort of reflection spot.

"Oh, I see…… You're going to take the photograph there."

Frankly, Masachika didn't want a photograph with Nonoa, who only gave him a creepy feeling. However, it seemed strange to nominate another female student here, so Masachika left without saying anything.

"Oh, well....."

"My Nonoa-chan is....."

Then he heard the pitiful voices of the brain-destroyed bastards all around him.

"I see, so this is a 'But I liked her first' situation....."

"BSS?"[3]

With Yuki and Alisa's exchange in the background, Masachika stood in front of the blackboard. Then Nonoa offered him a piece of chalk.

"Yes, master, please write your name here."

"My name?"

"So we can write Nonoa's and Master's name here~ Then we'll take the picture☆"

If you look at it, there was something like a flashy cross-like design in the middle. On the left side of it, Nonoa wrote her name in hiragana.[4]

(Ugh! So embarrassing!)

This may be a nice service from the maid cafe event perspective, but from Masachika's perspective, it was tantamount to a public execution. Also, the gaze from behind hurt. Icicles were mixed in with grudges from the other boys.

"Master?"

After being urged by Nonoa to write his name, Masachika wrote his own name after some hesitation. However, he did not stop there, and added, "Aiming for the next student council!" under their names.

For a moment, Nonoa suddenly became serious, but then put on a joyful smile.

“Hmmm, you are an interesting one, Master☆.”

After whispering so much, Nonoa smiled innocently again.

“Yes~, we’re ready~”

Masachika gently patted down his chest as Nonoa turned to Sayaka while saying this. Yes, doing this made it not look embarrassing, but rather instead a way to showcase the cooperative relationship between the Kujou/Kuze pair and the Taniyama/Miyamae pair. If you think of it that way, it was nothing to be ashamed of──

“Please make a heart sign with your hand in front of your chest. I’m going to take the photograph with a ‘One, two~, three, Love Kyuu[5]~’”

Masachika’s face turned serious at the unsympathetic words of the chief maid.

“It was delicious, the curry.”

“Right, there were a lot of ingredients. It was more authentic than I thought it would be.”

Satisfied with the curry, which was better prepared than expected, Masachika and the others sat down.

“Not yet! If this happens, I’m going to push it to the limit!”

“I’ve come this far and I’m not going to back down!”

Pretending not to notice the boys who had gone to the point of no return, Masachika headed for the checkout.

“Yes, this is the photograph I mentioned earlier.”

“Oh, thank you……”

Masachika honestly didn't want it and would rather throw it away now as it was just black history to him. However, he was also hesitant to throw it away in public.

(Well, I'll throw it away when I get home……)

With that in mind, Masachika shoved the photograph he received into his chest pocket without even looking at it. Then he went out and followed the plan he had discussed during their meal and headed for the schoolyard. And,

"Oh, I'm sorry~!"

"Oops"

Nonoa, who seemed to be heading to pick up ordered food, overtook him from behind. While attracting the attention of students passing through the corridor, Nonoa entered Class F's classroom, which was used as a changing room and cooking room.

She didn't even look at them as she passed by.

"Everyone must be busy, but do your best♡."

"Leave it to me! Hey, you guys, get into it!"

""""Uoooh!!!""""

Masachika became distant as he heard the voices of the impeccably trained boys coming from inside. Alisa also looked a little surprised, looking toward the classroom and muttering approvingly.

"I thought I didn't see any boys out front, but…… they are working completely behind the scenes."

"Oh. I guess regarding the project of maid cafes, I thought it was the boys who came up with the idea, but I wonder if that was…… the case. This whole thing feels like the social status of the boys was low."

The group of maids were squeezing money out of their male clients while using their male classmates as labor for their own good. Was this what happened when the leadership of Sayaka, one of the best commanders on campus, was enhanced by Nonoa's charm? Masachika even felt a kind of brainwashing.

“It’s hard, chef! We don’t have enough pots and pans to make leftovers!”

“H-Hah? Dumbass! Go buy more now!”

“What, how about this small pot……”

“So what? The girls put in a lot of effort to serve the customers! You should put some burden on yourself too!!”

“! Yes!!”

……Even the interactions between the boys reassembled that of military men in training.

“……That maid cafe has a lot of dark sides.”

“After all this time, I’m starting to think that we are actually the MVPs for preventing Sayaka and her group from becoming the junior high school student body president.”

“Well, but no one seems to be forcing them to do anything…… Considering the unity of the group……”

All three of them exchanged such comments with subtle expressions on their faces, and Masachika and the others left the area. The three of them spent the next 30 minutes going from one exhibit to the next, capturing the attention of everyone around them. Checking her watch, Yuki exclaimed,

“I have to go back to work at my class in about 20 minutes…… One last thing, if you would like to come and see our show, would you be willing to come and see what we have to offer?”

Taking up the offer, the three visited Class 1A’s classroom. There, they found festival-style lantern decorations here and there, with a yo-yo fishing game, a target practice game, ring tossing, and other activities lined up in a corner.

“Welcome, Kujou-san! Amazing……”

The boys near the entrance gasped at the sight of Alisa and then exclaimed. The other students were the same way, suddenly startled by the surprise, and then turned around to look at the members who had entered the room, and immediately afterwards were speechless at the

sight of Alisa. Even the students in the next class, who should be relatively familiar with Alisa, were shocked to see her in elf form.

“Thank you all for your hard work. I will attend to these two, so please stay where you are.”

Yuki called out to the students and the students of Class A, who had been dazed, began to move slowly. However, they were still concerned, glancing at Alisa while dealing with the customers in front of them. But that went for the guests as well.

“So, Alya, would you like to participate in any of these?”

“Let’s see, well..... I’d like to try yo-yo fishing. I didn’t catch a single one at the last festival, so I want to avenge that loss.”

The moment Alisa said that, the students who were playing yo-yo fishing quickly vacated their places. Alisa was a little startled by their quick response.

“P-Please~ come~ on in, Kujou-san! Over here!”

The boy who was in charge of the yo-yo fishing store, indicating the vacant spot with his hand, shouted with a sense of superiority and joy. As Alisa turned to him, Masachika took off his robe and handed it to her.

“Eh?”

“Here, wrap this around your leg. The water might splash around like it did the other day.”

“Ah.....”

Unlike Masachika’s robe, which was a cheap commercial item, Alisa’s costume was a first-class handmade item. He couldn’t bear to get it wet.....but in reality, the main purpose was to prevent her panties from being visible as she squatted. Alisa seemed to have noticed this as well, and after a bit of embarrassment in her eyes, she uttered a small “thank you.”

Then, as he tried to follow Alisa, who was holding his robe and quickly heading toward the yo-yo fishing stall ..... a crowd quickly formed around her, and Masachika laughed.

“Oi, come on…… What are you going to do with the other exhibits?”

Even the students who were in charge of other areas abandoned their posts, and even Yuki had to laugh at this.

“Well, all the other guests have gone to see her too… It’s like her very existence is now an obstruction to our business.”

“I guess…… By the way, should I comment on her~ who has been blending into the air for a while now?”

“Please don’t touch her right now. As a maid, she has mixed feelings about it.”

“I see.”

“So, Masachika-kun, would you like to try any of these? Like I said, I’ll take care of the customer service, okay? I won’t give any prizes, though.”

“You’re not?”

“Because if I do, Masachika will win everything.”

“That’s right.”

Since there was no one around, the two of them talked a little more frankly than they did earlier.

“Yes, that’s right…… But I don’t think even the mighty Masachika-san can win that.”

Yuki pointed to a stuffed bear that was placed in the center of the upper level of the target shooting table. Unlike the other prizes, it was sitting firmly on the table, and didn’t seem to be scared by the slightest bit of movement.

“……such dignity.”

“They say it’s a teddy bear of a famous British brand. It seemed to be a one-of-a-kind item handcrafted by artisans and coveted by fans.”

“Why is such a thing at a target practice game?”

“Because it’s Seirei Gakuen.”

“Damn, how convincing.”

Saying this, Masachika headed for the firing range. When challenged, it was his duty to respond.

“Okay, five shots for 300 yen.”

“No, you’re not taking my money.”

“In return, if you can tip over that stuffed animal, we’ll make sure to give it to you.”

After saying this with a smug look on her face, Yuki smiled and whispered with a plain expression on her face.

“(Why don’t you give Alya a gift to remember the school festival? My brother.)”

At Yuki’s words, Masachika looked over his shoulder at Alisa, who was yo-yo fishing with a serious expression on her face, then silently took out his wallet.

“Five rounds for now.”

“Yes~”

Masachika received five cork bullets from Yuki, loaded them into the gun with a familiar motion, and then precisely aimed them at the stuffed animal. And when he quietly pulled the trigger, the cork ball was sucked into the stuffed animal’s head without missing its target… and bounced off!

“No, isn’t this too hard?”

“I told you you wouldn’t get it.”

“Even so. It’s set to be a little harder, even compared with the crane game.”

Masachika hit it cleanly on the forehead and it just shook its head a little. The stuffed animal was still sitting on the table, looking as fluffy as ever. Staring at its slightly bent-over position, Masachika asked Yuki.

“……Yuki, how many guns do you have?”

“? There are four in total.”

“Get out the rest.”

Asking Yuki to line up the four guns, Masachika put the remaining balls into them one by one.

“...are you going to do a series of shots? I don’t think that’s enough to drop it.”

“Yuki……”

At his sister’s prediction, Masachika called her name as if to condemn her for her hasty decision. Then he said quietly, staring at the stuffed animal.

“I’ve been practicing my fusion skills lately, you know?”

“Seriously, everyone likes that kind of thing.”

Masachika laughed at his sister’s unintentional outburst of naivete, and held up his gun as if looking up from below.

“I’ll tell you…… What’s important is how you convey power.”

Saying this gruffly, Masachika pulled the trigger.

The released cork bullet passes directly under the stuffed animal, bounces off the blackboard behind it, and hits the back of the stuffed animal in the head. Without seeing the result, Masachika continued to switch guns and continued to shoot precisely at the same spot.

As a result, the stuffed animal, which had been sitting slightly bent forward, plunged forward and fell to the floor, including the other prizes that were on it, and fell to the floor.

“Alright.”

“No, not alright. What’s with such high difficulty?”

“Yes, so you had to use the secret technique ‘release internal power’”

“Shut up.”

When Masachika tsukkomi’d with a straight face, Yuki let out a sigh of exasperation and picked up the stuffed animal.

“Oh~, I didn’t think you would really win it..... It was going to be the highlight of tomorrow’s giveaway. Well, a promise is a promise.”

Yuki, who grinned and turned his attention to Alisa, then handed the stuffed animal to Masachika.

“Fu-fun~, then, here you go? I’m so happy to give you such a present~♪”

Masachika handed the stuffed animal he received from Yuki back to her.

“Oh.....?”

“Take it.”

“What?”

Masachika looked at Yuki, who was just plain dumbfounded. With gentle, slightly sad eyes he said, “I’m sorry.”

“You can have a stuffed animal now, right?”

It was when Masachika was still in the Suou family. At that time, Yuki, who had severe asthma as a child, was unable to hold stuffed toys, which were prone to dust. The stuffed animals she used to carry around with her when she was little were put away, and she spent most of her time in a simple, sickroom-like room where cleanliness was a top priority.

Masachika couldn’t give Yuki the stuffed bear he got at the arcade that time. That sense of regret, which remained deep in his heart, was now driving Masachika.

“.....”

At Masachika’s words, Yuki held the stuffed animal tightly and looked down. Then, after shaking her shoulders for a few seconds as if she was holding something back, she looked up with a calm expression on her face.

“Oh shit..... you’re flattering me in broad daylight in the classroom!”

“What?”

“Well, you didn’t need to raise your favorability with me, you know? It’s already maxed.”

“I’m the type of guy who feeds the fish I catch.”[6]

“Oh, my dear, dear onii-chan.”

Yuki then buried her mouth in the stuffed animal and shook her body in embarrassment.

“Mmmmmm~, mmmmmm..... Onii-chan....why are you my big brother?”

“Because I was born before you.”

“Oh, that’s it? Then I don’t need to respect you.”

“Why all of a sudden?”

Suddenly, Yuki’s expression turned blank, and Masachika picked up on it with a straight face. Then, after thinking about it for a moment, he clicked his tongue further with a jittery look.

“.....I mean, I don’t even remember being respected by you.”

“.....Huh? I don’t either.”

“So you aren’t respecting me.”

“If you want to be respected, I think there’s a certain attitude that goes with that.”

“Well if you want me to be a respectful older brother, I think you need to change your attitude.”

“What’s wrong with me, the cutest little sister in the world?”

“Like the way you’ve been changing your facial expressions since a while ago.”

“That’s because every time I feel her eyes on me, I go back into ojou-sama mode.”[7]

“I’m impressed with your super-sensitivity.”

“I’m good at it, aren’t I?”

“It’s strange though.”

After smiling elegantly at her brother in an ojou-sama manner, Yuki broke into a grin.

“Thank you, onii-chan.”

“Hmm.”

Masachika almost patted her head without thinking, and only nodded a little. Yuki laughed as if she understood even that, and the air between the two siblings was relaxed—they both bounced their shoulders together at the peaceful feeling that came rushing in.

When Masachika turned around, he saw Alisa staring at him from behind a crowd with a yo-yo in her hand. Alisa stood up like a ghost and retreated into the crowd. Then she smiled faintly with eyes that were not smiling at all.

“It was fun”

“Oh, my…… Alya was kind of excited, wasn’t she?”

“Well…… I finally got one after a lot of hard work.”

“Oh, good…”

“And? What were you two doing while I was struggling so hard?”

As Alisa tilted her head with a smile on her face, Masachika couldn’t say, “we were flirting,” and only stated the facts.

“…I was shooting.”

“And?”

“Yuki said I wouldn’t be able to win this…… so I was determined to get it.”

“Yeah, so?”

“…… Well, I don’t need a stuffed animal…… I was thinking of giving it to Yuki.”

“Hmm~”

While Alisa’s voice was full of emotions, the students of Class A, who seemed to have finally noticed the situation, began to panic.

“Oh, wait a minute, they won the stuffed animal!”

“You’re kidding me! I didn’t see it at all!!”

“No, I didn’t either. What, didn’t anyone see it?”

Yuki called out to the corner of the classroom to her classmates, who still couldn’t believe it.

“He really shot them down without any irregularities at all, didn’t he? Hey, Ayano.”

In response to Yuki’s call, Ayano, who was blended into the air for a while, quietly spoke up.

“Yes, indeed.”

When Ayano nodded expressionlessly, the students of Class A held their heads together. Ayano continued, somewhat proudly and with deep emotion, in front of a crowd of students who were screaming “No way!”

“It was a truly wonderful divine act…… Masachika-sama’s secret technique that is.”

“No, wai—.”

As soon as Masachika raised a panicked voice, the clamor stopped. They all hold their heads up and look seriously at Ayano and Masachika with straight faces.

“A secret technique…… What?”

“Didn’t she say it herself?”

“Well.”

“No, she was just kidding!”

All at once, they looked at Masachika with donned eyes, and although he hurriedly made excuses, the atmosphere remained the same.

“Masachika-kun……”

“Ah, Alya?”

“……don’t get too excited at school festivals.”

“Don’t look at me pitifully!”

Masachika’s plaintive cry echoed through the Class A classroom.

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[1]: Sparkling sound effect.

[2]: Akiba, short for Akihabara, is a major otaku shopping district and entertainment center, which in its nature thus has a lot of maid cafes.

[3]: BSS stands for Boku ga Saki datta no ni (ぼくがさきにすきだったのに) which roughly means “Even though I loved her first” and is used to describe a situation in which someone is jealous that their romantic interest has ended up with someone else. Pretty sure it’s also a sub-genre of NTR in which you would find the main character being rejected by his romantic interest, who ends up with someone else.

[4]: Japanese is written by using a mix of kanji (Chinese) characters and two syllabaries, hiragana and katakana. In this context, Nonoa was writing her name in only hiragana.

[5]: Kissing sound effect.

[6]: So originally, the common idiom here is actually the opposite of what he says: “I don’t feed the fish I catch” and basically represents guys who don’t treat their girlfriend well (such as giving her flowers, represented in the part “not feeding the fish”) since they have already succeeded in going out with her (represented in “catching the fish”). So here, Masachika is basically saying that he’s the opposite of that kind of person, and would go out of his lengths to take care of those he’s close to.

[7]: “Her” as in Alya. She’s trying to not act like Masachika’s little sister in front of her since they’re still keeping it a secret.

Chapter 3 - I Took It More Seriously Than The Debate

“I’m sorry. Don’t sulk so much.”

“I’m not sulking.”

Masachika, who had been branded a chuunibyou[1] by the Class A students, left the classroom and walked aimlessly down the hallway while trying to cheer Alisa up, who still seemed to be in a foul mood.

Well, when you think about it, he could understand Alisa’s frustration. Judging from the excitement that could be heard in the crowd, Alisa’s yo-yo fishing vengeance game must have been spectacular. Still, after many attempts and failures, she finally caught the fish and turned around with a sense of accomplishment…… only to realize that the two of them, who had been going around together without seeing any of her struggles, were enjoying themselves amicably, leaving Alisa alone. If the same thing had happened to Masachika with Takeshi and Hikaru, even he would feel some sense of alienation.

【Mine, you’re my partner……】

“……Stop mumbling in Russian, it’s scary!”

It made Masachika’s heart ache in a strange way.

“No, that…… was just an excuse. I was gonna watch you yo-yo fishing too, you know? But, you know, there were so many people there. You’re getting pretty popular……”

When Masachika said this brusquely, Alisa fiddled with her hair and glanced at Masachika.

“……you’ve also become a lot more dependable in class.”

“Huh? What?”

“During our shift just now…… You were the one in charge of managing our class, weren’t you?”

"……ah."

Yes, now that she mentioned it, it was true. Masachika wasn't really aware of it because he had been giving instructions to others as a member of the festival committee for a while now.

But if you thought about it carefully, until the first semester, Masachika's reputation in the class would have been that of a "silly, insincere otaku." He was not ridiculed directly face-to-face, but Masachika was definitely seen as "inferior" because he came from a middle-class family.

Masachika himself was not particularly concerned about that in the first place. In fact, he even thought it was better to be looked down upon to a certain extent in order to build better relationships with the people around him. As the saying goes, "The stakes are high, but the hawk hides its claws." If you stood out in a strange way, people would be wary of you, but if they looked down on you, they would let their guard down and it would be easier to enter their pockets.[2]

You can only show your usefulness when you are in their pockets. If the other person then understood, they would change their response accordingly, and if they don't, you can simply take the initiative by flattery……. Apart from the idea that it was simply too much trouble to be expected to do strange things.

"Now that you mention it…… You're right."

Masachika didn't recall showing any particular usefulness, but he did think that the class's opinion on him had changed over time. What was the trigger…? When he thought about it, it goes without saying that it was when he joined the student council.

"I guess the closing ceremony was a big deal, wasn't it?"

"Huh? Ah~…… Maybe."

Masachika thought for a moment before nodding at Alisa's words.

Thinking back on it, back then, Masachika had said something like, "I was the Vice-President who worked in the shadows in middle school" in front of all the students.

In fact, when he was on the student council in middle school, Masachika was always behind the scenes. He was sneaking around behind the scenes, partly because Yuki was too dependable as a partner, but he was also mature enough to help with Yuki's appearance in school events. That was why most students did not even remember that he was the Vice-President until he revealed his identity at that closing ceremony, not even to mention his classmates.

"That raised my reputation a little bit..... and as I entered the second semester as a member of the school festival committee, I naturally came to be looked upon with admiration, if I do say so myself."

"Is that so? I thought you were always more dependable than I was."

"But..... I see. You can't hide competence afterall, can you?"

He scratched his hair and flashed a wry smile.

【You could have hidden it a little longer.】

Alisa turned away sulkily and whispered in Russian.

".....are you still mad about something?"

"No? I just thought you might have forgotten your promise to me."

"Promise?"

He didn't really know what she was talking about, so Masachika tilted his head and..... Alisa stared at him, as he hurriedly searched his memories for the answer. Then a conversation he had with Alisa on the stairs near the music room struck.

"Oh, w-wait~, is that it? Going around the school festival together...? Huh, we're going around right now though, right?"

"This is.....no-no. I wasn't invited by you."

"Oh, that's important?"

"It's important. And I never said we'd go around together in the first place. I said, 'Entertain me at the school festival.'"

That meant she wasn't enjoying it right now..... or so he thought. And in light of the current situation, which was making her grumpy right now, Masachika was unable to say anything.

【We weren't alone in the first place.】

(Oh, yeah..... That's right.)

【Not by being pressured..... But you should have invited me out properly instead.】

(Sorry.)

【More romantically.】

(Don't raise the bar.)

Apparently, Alisa wanted Masachika to formally ask her on a date. Based on Alisa's attitude, Masachika guessed she wanted to maintain her princess-like position, with the mindset of "If you're willing to humiliate yourself and invite me, I can go around with you, okay?". If so, he could understand why she said this was currently a no-no.

"I'm sorry..... I'll make this up to you tomorrow."

"……yes."

Alisa replied curtly and turned away with a pout. Apparently, Masachika's attempts to make good on his promise with "this" had caused her to completely bend out of shape.[3]

(Hmmm~, what's up with that..... Well, it's totally my fault.)

Rather, Masachika should be thankful for the opportunity to recover..... As he stared at Alisa's back, who was staggering ahead of him, Masachika suddenly noticed a student across from Alisa trying to hold up their phone. Quickly interrupting Alisa as soon as he realized, Masachika spread his robe with his right hand to hide Alisa's figure.

"Yes, there. I understand your desire to take pictures of this beautiful elf, but could you please ask permission first before doing so?"

Then, after giving a playful warning, the boy hurried away with an uncomfortable look.

Masachika was relieved to see that he was a very understanding student…….

“Eh, I can take her picture if she gives permission?”

Masachika froze as several nearby girls, taking Masachika’s words to heart, approached them at once, phones in hand. Moreover, even other passing students who saw the scene began to stop, hoping for a chance.

“No, that was a figure of speech——”

“Kujou-san, turn around!”

“Elf-san! Can I take one picture?”

“Well, if possible, give me a two person photo……”

The cheerful-looking female students, oblivious to Masachika’s words, were closing the distance between them.

(They’re too pushy! What should I do? Should we at least be willing to accept some photos for the reputation of our campaign? Girls wouldn’t have any ulterior motive…… but if we accept one, more will ask and we’ll never be able to handle it……)

First of all, Masachika should confirm Alisa’s intention…… When he turned around to look behind himself, Alisa looked back at him, who also seemed to be at a loss for a response.

(Oh, yeah…… She doesn’t look like she can take a picture while smiling right now. I knew I should have said no——)

Masachika decided against it, and as he turned his head to the front to refuse,

“You guys? It’s not a pretty sight to be pushy, is it?”

A dignified voice pierced the crowd, and everyone, including Masachika, turned at once in the direction of the voice. Then, everyone was brought to their senses.

There was a group of girls dressed as knights. At the forefront was a beautiful schoolgirl with honey coloured hair in a ringlet roll

hairstyle[4]. She was the head of the women's kendo club and vice-chairman of the Discipline Committee, Kiryuin Sumire herself.

"Violet-senpai……!"

"What a mess……!"

The female students, who were eager to take Alisa's picture, were also fascinated by her dignified and beautiful appearance. As she calmly approached them, Violet looked at Masachika, who was protecting Alisa with his robe, and Masachika, receiving her intention, lowered his right hand. After letting out a satisfied smile at that, Violet looked at the female students and said,

"When approaching a woman, you should make an offer in a gentlemanly manner rather than forcefully. Yes, like this."

With that, Violet gracefully brushed off her cloak and dropped to one knee, placing her right hand on her own chest and holding out her left hand toward Alisa.

"Beautiful elf lady, would you do me the honor of capturing a moment of your life?"

"……oh, yes."

Her behavior, like the prince of all girls' ideals, made Alisa nod her head in agreement. Then,

""""""""Kyaaaaaahhh!!""""""""

A scream, so loud that it almost made the hallway windows explode. Or rather, the windows actually shook. While receiving the screams of the female students all around her, Violet casually stood up to protect Alisa and told the students in the hallway.

"Alright? As students of Seirei Gakuen, you must always remember to be civil."

After saying this in a lecturing tone, Violet continued, "Well."

"I don't expect you to suddenly be able to do what I do……. First of all, let me be your instructor."

As she said this, Violet approached the nearest female student.

“Now, how are you supposed to ask for this?”

“Ha, ha..... Uh, uh, a moment of your——?”

“You just have to ask sincerely in your own words, without pressure.”

“Yes, um! Can I take a picture with one of you!?”

“Yes, take good care of me.”

Laughing leisurely, Violet gave a perfectly camera-conscious pose and expression in seconds. At the same time, Masachika gestured with a gentle wave behind his back and quietly left the scene with Alisa. In doing so, he did not forget to express his gratitude in a whisper.

“(Thank you, Violet-senpai.)”

“It’s Sumire desuwa[5]!”

Apparently, that was the only thing she couldn’t miss hearing.

Masachika laughed a little at the instant denial. He then looked at Violet, who was directing traffic while responding to a photo shoot, and muttered admiringly.

“Really, that girl’s got a real talent for that kind of thing..... She knows how to charm herself. Well, in terms of acting, her cousin Yusho is the same way.”

Still, Yusho’s prince-like behavior seemed somewhat distasteful, perhaps because Masachika was a male.

“Well, Alya, are you alright? I guess that’s the downside of being so popular.....”

“Yeah, well..... Thank you for protecting me.”

Masachika shrugged his shoulders as Alisa looked away and thanked him in a whisper.

“Don’t worry about it. Rather, I feel like I’ve only caused more trouble..... Sorry, I failed.”

“No, I couldn’t do anything by myself. I can’t say I blame you, Masachika.”

“Well, there may be more of these things to come, so I guess we’ll just have to be diligent with each other.”

“……yes.”

After that, there was a long period of silence. For some reason, Alisa’s mood got better, but this time the air became a little heavy, and Masachika scratched his head wondering what to do. He then casually looked around and spotted a nearby classroom.

“Oh, there…… That’s the magic bar that Masha-san and Sarashina-senpai run, right? Would you like to take a look at it?”

“What? ……Well, okay.”

“All right. Oh, can I have a table for two?”

“Please~, take a seat at an empty table~.”

As the student at the entrance led him inside, Masachika squinted as the room was dimmer than he expected. Jazz music was playing discreetly in the room, and the overall atmosphere was relaxed. Horizontal tables were brought together and arranged in a U-shape, open toward the entrance, with magic performed at each table.

“Ah, Alya-chan, Kuze-kun, come here~!”

A familiar voice called out to Masachika, and he turned to see Maria, who seemed to have just had some free time on her hands, beckoning him to come over.

“Oh, Masha…… That’s kind of an amazingly mature look.”

“Really~? Thanks~. Woah, Alya is very cute too!”

She was smiling as usual, and her smile seemed to make them smile as well. However, the relaxed atmosphere of the room and the bartender’s costume and her vest gave Maria a mature charm. Although she was already older, Maria today has a strong atmosphere of being a kind onee-san, which made Masachika a little nervous.

(Woah, this is bad…… I’d drink endlessly if a lady like this were to keep offering me a drink.)

He got in front of the table where Maria was, thinking about this unintentionally. The slightly long table was hung with a large cloth to hide the legs of the table. Probably to keep the audience from seeing the magician from the waist down. The arrangement of the tables showed that care had been taken to ensure that the guests did not come to the back side of where the magician was.

“Well, you just sat down, but is this place alright for Alya?”

“I don’t mind. I’m just a little worried about whether I’ll be able to see proper magic or not”

“Ahhhh~, don’t make fun of me~! Even your onee-chan can do magic, you know? I’ve had lots of practice~.”

Maria put her hands on her hips looking pouty and angry. However, she immediately smiled and offered the menu to them.

“Which drink would you like? Of course, it’s all non-alcoholic, so don’t worry, okay?”

Following the concept of a magic bar, the menu was lined with names of non-alcoholic cocktails. Masachika knew some of them by knowledge, but Alisa seemed to be out of touch with cocktails and hardened in the face of seemingly completely unknown names, which at first glance were not entirely clear in their details. However, she stared at the menu silently, as if her pride would not allow Masachika to ask her sister what kind of drink this was for her.

“Okay, I’ll take a Cinderella.”

“Oh, then the same one……”

“Yes, two Cinderellas~. Well, I’ll just be a minute then, okay?”

Even Maria must have been aware of Alisa’s apparent disingenuousness. However, without making any pretense of doing so, Maria collected the menu and crouched down at her feet. Then, after rummaging around for a while, she stood up, shaker and glass in hand.

“Then I’ll make a Cinderella, okay~? Though I’m not a magical old lady.”[6]

With a quick and mysterious remark, Maria snapped the shaker in two and put water in a plastic bottle in the lower half.

“Oh, wait a minute?”

While Alisa was puzzled, Maria combined the shakers and shook them together. Then, the shaker’s lid was removed and she tipped over the glass—pouring a yellow drink into the glass.

“Huh? Ah—”

After sounding genuinely curious, Alisa closed her mouth as if she had done something wrong. However, once her voice leaked out, it could not be muffled, and Maria placed the glass in front of Alisa with a light smirk on her face.

“Here you go.”

“Oh, my~.”

Masachika applauded, and Alisa clapped as well, albeit a little frustrated. Of course, Masachika was aware of the magic trick now. Because Masachika, an otaku, was ready to get involved in a game at any time of his life.

Now, the magic sequence was simple. The top and bottom halves of the shaker were independent containers, so all she needed to do was just put the Cinderella drink in the top half beforehand. Of course, when Masachika saw through this, he wasn’t tactless enough to flaunt the fact that he did. Even if figured it out, he decided to be polite and act surprised.

“Okay, now I’ll show you some magic card tricks, okay?”

With that said, Maria now took out a table mat and started spreading out a deck of cards on it. Her hands were well trained and showed the amount of practice she had done.

“So, first, let’s split this deck of cards in two. Kuze-kun, can you say ‘stop’ wherever you like?”

“Yes.”

Pretending to be an amateur, Masachika followed Maria’s instructions.

(Like Alya, I was a little worried…… But it doesn't seem like she's facing any problems at all. Well, it's true that Masha's a bit of an airhead in front of Alya and such, but she's a fundamentally solid person.)

Masachika was relieved like that, but……he was still unaware. The fact is that there was a fairly clear rule concerning Maria's transition from being an onee-chan to an onee-san.[7]

It was simple enough to say, but the more Maria thought, "I must be strong!", the more determined she became. For example, when dealing with people who are in need of vigilance, or when the people you are with are unreliable. Conversely, the more trustworthy the people she was with, the more she became distracted and said, "I don't need to be firm, do I~?"

With that in mind, who was now in front of Maria? Yes, it was Alisa and Masachika. Both were people that Maria trusted and loved to the utmost degree. In front of these two, Maria was flustered to the highest levels, coupled with a sense of happiness. If anything, Masha was feeling faint. In terms of IQ, maybe she currently had 50, and in terms of concentration, it was about 30 lower. As a result,

(Huh? Now…… I thought you had to double-lift it.)

Masachika felt uncomfortable with Maria's proceedings, but Maria didn't seem fazed and continued.

"Now, Alya has to put the card she chose in her pocket. We'll do the magic trick here ~…… Three, two~, one."

Masachika counted, and Maria did a finger-punch that didn't sound at all like a thump on the deck of cards. She then flipped the card to reveal the other side.

"Oh?"

""……""

Masachika turned over a card that was turned over, and its back was now face up again. ……It was the one they shouldn't have been allowed to see the most.

"Excuse me, Masha, can I have a refill?"

“Oh, yes~!”

Unable to think of a good follow-up, Masachika pretended he had seen nothing. Alisa also raised her glass to her mouth with an indescribable expression on her face. She couldn’t get worked up about this, no matter how much her sister was on the other end of the line.

“Well, then, let me get back on track and show you a magic trick using cups and balls this time!”

With their concern, Maria started over with another trick..... but from there her act was all over the place. It didn’t go at all as advertised and Masachika saw a lot of things he shouldn’t have seen. Masachika and Alisa sipped their drinks after every one of them, and Masachika found himself on his fourth Cinderella drink.

“Ummm~..... I’m sorry, okay? I’m feeling a little under the weather today.”

“You’re not in the best shape today.....”

“No, well, you know, I’m sure things were going well earlier, right? It’s not the same when you’re performing for family members, right?”

Alisa had coldly criticized her for her repeated failures. In response, Masachika somehow managed to follow up. At that moment, the classroom door opened, and Maria’s face lit up when she looked over.

“Ah, Chisaki-chan~. Over here, over here~!”

“Hmm? What’s up, Masha?”

Looking in the direction where Maria called out to, he saw Chisaki entering, dressed in a bartender’s outfit and wearing an earring with a purple stone in one ear.

The outfit suited the tall Chisaki well. Combined with her poised appearance, she had the aura of a cool, mature woman.

“Woah, Sarashina-senpai looks so cool!”

“Haha, thanks.”

Chisaki replied to the unintentional praise with a smile. Even her reaction resembled that of an adult, and Masachika couldn't help but exhale in exasperation. His body temperature dropped three degrees, but Masachika pretended not to notice that.

"Sorry~, I don't do magic well at all..... I'm sorry to leave it like this, so why don't you show them one of your magic tricks for me?"

"Huh? Yeah, well, that's okay."

Blinking her eyes briefly, Chisaki explored the pockets of her vest and took Maria's place, coughing lightly.

"Well, I'll show you a magic trick, okay? Here's a coin."

With that, Chisaki took a coin from the pocket of her vest and lightly slammed it on the table.

"As you can see, it's just a coin. Pick it up and see for yourself!"

After exhibiting a hard clanking sound, Chisaki offered the coin to Masachika. Masachika gently rolled it in his hand and immediately handed it to Alisa. The coins that were handed to the spectators had no real tricks to them, nine times out of ten. Rather, the idea was to set something up while you're distracted with this, or switch to a coin with a trick afterwards. Knowing this, Masachika focused his attention on Chisaki's hand, not on the coin that was given to him.

(Well, from the looks of it, she doesn't have any other tools..... If it's only a single coin, was it pure technique without any gimmicks?)

While Masachika was thinking about this, Alisa's check was completed and the coin was returned to Chisaki's hand. Then Chisaki smiled wryly and said,

"So, first, let's split this coin in two."

"You're going to split it in two?"

"Yeah!"

"Woah."

"Yeah....."

Chisaki ripped the coins in half with a “snip, snip, snip” action, as if she were tearing a piece of paper. In a flash, the coin turned into two half-circles, each warped in the opposite direction.

“Take a good look~. It’s in two pieces, isn’t it?”

“I’m surprised at how quickly they’ve changed.”

“Eh, well, huh?”

What used to be a coin made a clicking sound on Chisaki’s hand.

“Now, I’ll hold this in my hand.”

Saying this, Chisaki held the coin, which was now split in two, in her right hand and raised it to her face. Then, she started counting with her left hand.

“I’m starting, okay? Three, two~, one. Haaaa!”

With a voice that sounded like the uttering of a special move rather than a spell, Chisaki’s right hand was clenched with a grueling clench. And when Chisaki slowly opened her right hand——

“Behold! The disconnected coins disappeared and a pachinko ball[8] appeared!”

“Oh~!”

“A pachinko ball?”

Alisa tilted her head slightly while she clapped. Masachika understood that feeling well. Because, for a pachinko ball, there was some kind of coin-like feeling on the surface[9]. But he wasn’t going to point that out. This was because it was good manners not to point out how tricks were done when you noticed it, and it wasn’t because Masachika was afraid.

“How about it? Was it fun?”

“It was interesting, I mean, it was amazing. I think you could win a world magic championship.”

“It’s not magic, it’s a miracle……”

Masachika nodded at Alisa's assessment. Indeed, it was more of a miracle than a magic trick. Whether or not she is aware of her kouhai's inner thoughts, Chisaki scratched her cheeks in embarrassment.

"Really? I'm glad you enjoyed it~..... I knew it was worth it to have a mentor teach me."

"Who's this mentor?"

"Well, my grandma, in case you're wondering."

"No way, I didn't expect your mentor to be that old... I thought they would have been a machine[10]."

"I'm glad you enjoyed the show. Well, then, it looks like Masha screwed up a lot, so..... you can pay with your feelings instead, okay?"

"After being shown this, 'you can pay for with your feelings' is practically a threat."

"Eh, what?"

"Nevermind."

Masachika and Alisa paid the fee as requested by their senpai, who was plainly stunned, and left the classroom.

".....I knew we wouldn't see proper magic."

"Yeah..... Neither of them were decent in magic in any way."

Masachika thought he saw something more amazing than magic, though.

"Oh, I don't know how she did that act though..... Was it a soft metal or something?"

"I wonder? I don't know if there was a trick to begin with....."

"If only it were as easy to understand Masha. God, I feel like I've had a lot of stuff spoiled today....."

"Yeah, well, you know."

"Huh, I really don't know how she keeps screwing up like that... Even though she's pretty dependable as a student council member....."

“……”

Masachika smiled vaguely at Alisa, who looked skeptical.

He was certain that Alisa genuinely thought of Maria as a laid-back, fluffy older sister. In fact, Maria tends to act fluffier unconsciously in front of Alisa, so it was not surprising that this impression was so strong.

(Maybe she’s rarely seen as a solid older sister.)

It seemed a bit of a waste to think so, but since it was Maria’s own desire to be regarded as an “unreliable sister” by Alisa, Masachika felt a bit regretful but did not say anything.

“Well then, we’ve got to get to the executive committee meeting, so why don’t we head on over to get changed?”

“Oh…… Yeah, right.”

“I mean, should Alya go to the handicraft clubroom for that?”

When Masachika asked her this while looking at Alisa’s clearly empowering elf costume, she nodded her head and said, “Yes.” With that, they went to the handicraft club room.

“Oh, Kuze-san.”

“Ah, yo.”

Masachika raised his hand lightly when his eyes met those of a female club member he knew who was just tending to the store. She was quite a beautiful girl with long black hair tied in a single knot at the back of her neck, and she had a homely atmosphere to her.

She was a classmate of Masachika and was the head of the handicraft club when Masachika was Vice President of the middle school student council, and through that relationship, they had come to rely on each other in various different ways. She was a so-called “otaku-friendly beautiful girl” and her friendly personality made her quite popular among some boys…… Masachika often calls her “Slit-Paisen[11]” after a quote she once uttered. Again, she was a classmate.

“I guess you didn’t come…… to see the exhibit today.”

“Yeah, the main reason we’re here is getting Alya changed.”

“Roger. I’ll call the people who made those costumes, okay? Oh, and while you’re at it, take a look while you’re waiting.”

When encouraged to do so, Masachika entered the club room, where a variety of costumes were displayed on mannequins. Starting with a royal wedding dress, there were gothic lolita costumes, dancer-style costumes, tuxedos, military uniforms, and more, all of which were displayed in a variety of places, with the creator’s taste in full bloom.

“What, uh…… It’s amazing. It looks like a cosplay store.”

“In fact, I wonder if it is a cosplay store. People really make whatever they want.”

“Woah, this lace is so fine, the quality here is so high……”

“Like this dress, it really looks like it’s for sale……”

Masachika and Alisa were so impressed with the extraordinary quality of the costumes that they briefly forgot about their original objective. Then, while the both of them were freely looking around, Masachika suddenly looked at Slit-Paisen and asked.

“Hey, if Alya is wearing that elf costume, does that mean this exhibit also rents out costumes?”

“Huh? No…… Well~, basically, we don’t do that but only if the creator of the costume says it’s okay.”

“So basically, only if you’re good enough be a model for it.”

“Well, that’s how it is. And, well, there’s simply no one-size-fits-all. Though we can make some adjustments on the fly.”

“Well…… Then, I have a small favor to ask you……”

As the two of them were whispering together, a skeptical-looking Alisa approached them, and Masachika concluded the conversation.

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing? I was just thinking about how people kept asking you if it was okay to take pictures because the quality of the costume you’re wearing is so high.”

“Yeah, yeah, well, I can see why they’d want to take a picture~!”

Masachika nodded his head in appreciation of Slit-Paisen’s immediate willingness to accommodate his situation. Alisa still looked a little reluctant, but without seeming to be particularly skeptical.

“Not that this is a new thing, but…… It’s hard to react when someone you don’t know well asks for a picture.”

“Oh, she was approached on a regular basis.”

“Sometimes……. I turned down every time though”

“That’s…… another hard thing a beautiful woman must face I guess.”

When he responded sympathetically, Alisa looked down at an angle, fiddled with her hair, and muttered to herself.

【I wouldn’t mind being……photographed by you.】

At this, Masachika thought to himself, “Really?”

If you asked Masachika whether he wanted to photograph Alisa now or not, he definitely wanted to. Masachika definitely wanted to document such a super quality cosplay of an elf, but he was hesitant to ask her to do so because she refused to take photos for other people……

(Damn, what do I do……? I just found out that she would let me take a picture if I asked, but I’m still embarrassed to ask……! But if you ask me if I would take temporary shame for Alya’s photo, I would say…… Dahm!)

After several seconds of intense worrying, Masachika came to a conclusion.

“Alya.”

“?”

“I don’t know how to say this, but……before we change, why don’t we take a picture to commemorate the occasion? You know, it’s like a good opportunity.”

Masachika asked in a smart manner, pretending to be as casual as possible. Then Alisa’s eyebrows twitched, and her eyes narrowed in amusement.

“Hmm? You want to take a photograph that badly?”

“……Well, as an otaku in front of such a real elf, right?”

“……hmm~”

Alisa said, playing with her hair, while looking a little less amused by Masachika’s argument.

“And. Well, okay?”

“Oh, I see. Well, then——”

Then Masachika got a tap on the shoulder, and when he turned around, Slit-Paisen pointed to the next room with a smirk on her face.

“If that’s the case, you can use the room as a wardrobe, okay? Do you want to borrow it?”

“Ah, oh, thank you.”

“Okay.”

Slit Paisen took them to the next room, which turned out to be a storage room with shelves on both sides. The whole place was a little dusty, but there was an empty space by the window in the back that had been cleaned up nicely, and Slit-Paisen pointed to it.

“You can use that place. The sun is shining nicely right now so it looks good, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, indeed.”

Masachika asked Alisa to stand there as she told him, and indeed, it was quite nice. The club building had a Western-style architecture, so the atmosphere went well with the elf cosplay. In addition, the backlighting added a certain mystique to the scene.

“Well, I have to tend back to store duties.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you.”

“It’s all right.”

Watching Slit-Paisen leave, Masachika pulled out his phone.

“Then let’s get right to it……okay?”

“Eh, what pose should I……”

“No, leave it as is for now.”

“Yeah?”

Masachika started up the camera app to experiment with the setting, and while watching the screen, he adjusted the angle…

“Oh……”

There she was, a truly mystical elf. When viewed through the lens of a camera, things became increasingly impractical.

“Okay, then, let’s take one.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

While both of them were a little nervous, he clicked the shutter. When Masachika saw the pictures taken in this way, he couldn’t help but let out a gasp of admiration.

“Woah, so beautiful……”

“Eh, r-really?”

“Yeah……”

“Really? So, want to take more?”

“Certainly.”

No longer self-conscious of his embarrassment, Masachika asked for a straightforward request. Alisa then looked away for a moment, appearing unconcerned.

【Maybe, do you love……?】

(Not love.)

【Can you at least……pat my head?】

(……No patting.)

Inwardly thinking, “You’re still dragging out that joke you told Yuki……,” Masachika repeatedly clicked the shutter with a distant look in his eyes. Every time he changed angle or clicked the shutter, it seemed to bring out a different charm, and Masachika became more and more absorbed in the process. Then, when the number of shutter clicks exceeded 30——

“Huh?”

Masachika suddenly felt uncomfortable and checked the photo he had just taken.

“!?”

He checked, and his eyes widened a bit. What was displayed on the screen was Alisa’s white skirt! There, the silhouette of……Alisa’s lower body was clearly visible through it.

Masachika didn’t know how it happened. Perhaps the strong light from the window happened to shine through, and the settings on the camera side somehow miraculously merged with it.

Not that there was any underwear showing or anything. Not at all, but just the beauty of the silhouette of Alisa’s legs being shown in the……white skirt was somehow very, very suggestive.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing……”

Masachika was mortified after he reflexively answered Alisa’s question with denial.

Alisa was unaware of this miracle shot. Plus, it was not like Masachika caught her in her underwear or anything. Regardless, as a gentleman, this should still be deleted. But as a man, it would be a shame indeed to delete this miraculous shot.

(What should I do? Should I be honest? But if I were to be honest, I'll probably be obliterated……. I didn't take it on purpose, or more accurately, I'll never land a shot like this again even if I aimed for it!!!!)

Masachika fell into a state of worry in just three seconds…… then the angel Maria, who appeared in his brain, was instantly blown away by the little devil Yuki before he could say anything…… and he was left with no choice but to leave.

"It's nothing. There was just a little something extra in the picture."

Masachika pretended he didn't see it. Yeah, that was just his imagination. It's just some kind of weird shadow cast by the light, of course it is. Masachika, lying to himself with all his might and returning to the shoot as if nothing had happened…… Alisa said with a swoosh in her eyes.

"Show me."

"Huh?"

"Let me see the pictures you took."

As soon as she said this, Alisa quickly snatched the phone from Masachika's clenched hands.

"Ah——"

Before he could stop her, Alisa's finger brought up the photo he had taken just before…

"……Masachika."

"Yes."

"What is this?"

When Alisa asked him with a cold expression, Masachika contemplated and brought his negotiating skills to full strength.

Then, in five minutes of superb logic, including explaining sensuous art theory, Masachika forced Alisa to swallow his assertion that "This is art, not eroticism at all!". In this way, Masachika managed

to win the right to save this miraculous shot on the condition that he would not show it to anyone and would keep it under strict guard……

【I knew it, you're a dirty man with a leg fetish……】

Masachika felt that Alisa's favorability towards him had dropped a little.

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[1]: Chuunibyou, or “second year syndrome,” is a term used to describe teens who have heroic or fantasy-like delusions, such as being convinced that they have some sort of secret power, who want to stand out.

[2]: In the raws, the phrase “懐に入る” was used, which roughly translates to “entering someone’s chest”, but can mean “entering someone’s pockets” in this context. Historically when people mostly wore kimonos, they would keep their wallets in the chest area, thus meaning that the phrase describes the action of pick-pocketing someone. Now this phrase doesn’t directly describe someone as a pickpocketer, but rather someone sociable with good communication skills, as that is a characteristic needed to be a good pick-pocketer, or rather a characteristic associated with good pick-pocketers. Thus in this situation, Masachika is arguing that being looked down upon made it easier to be sociable.

[3]: The raws had the phrase “へそを曲げて” which roughly translates to “bent out of shape.” This is an idiom or phrase used to describe someone who is angry, as literally it means that their original “straight” stance or form has been bent, which is used to represent this.

[4]: Same kinda hairstyle like Beatrice from Re:Zero or the vocaloid Kasane Teto.

[5]: Her name’s actually Sumire (菫), (hiragana: すみれ), but Masachika calls her “Violet” since “Sumire” means Violet, to tease her. “Desuwa” literally means “more or less” but it’s used as slang at the end of some sentences. This kinda thing is also common in other East Asian languages (for example how Singaporeans/Malaysians end their sentences with “lah”).

[6]: Referencing the actual Cinderella story.

[7]: Both mean older sister here, but the former is used in a more playful/close manner, whereas the latter is used for addressing one with more respect, usually to someone who is more mature or grown up.

[8]: A Japanese pinball game played on a vertical machine in which slots struck by the player’s ball release other balls that in turn are exchanged for non cash prizes.

[9]: The “magic” trick here was that she broke the coin in half and mashed it into a ball with her bare hands.

[10]: Because usually machines are able to break coins into two and mash them into different shapes, not humans.

[11]: “Paisen” (パイセン) is a slang for “senpai” and is said backwards. “Slit” as in the slit of a dress (where the dress splits open in the leg area to allow for better mobility).

Chapter 4 - Honestly, My Heart Wavered Quite A Bit

When Masachika came home, a beautiful, neat and dark-haired, childhood friend greeted him with three fingers on the ground[1]. Or rather, Masachika was greeted by a cute maid when he got home. Both of these situations would be appealing to any healthy otaku male. Even Masachika had no objection to that.

“Welcome back, Masachika-sama.”

“Oh, oh.....”

That’s why this, too, would be a dream situation for otakus at first glance. At the entrance, the beautiful young maid, a childhood friend of his, bowed her head in a beautiful gesture. Her long, lustrous black hair flowed over her maid’s uniform and spread out like a veil, making her a true Yamato Nadeshiko. But..... If that posture was not a bow, but a dogeza, it would have been a different story.[2]

“.....What are you doing?”

Ayano pressed her entire palm, not just three fingers on each hand, against the floor and rubbed her forehead between her hands. How long had she been holding that position? Even Masachika was taken aback by this.

“Even if it was a competition, I have to apologize to Masachika-sama for a number of things——”

“Hey, don’t explain it naturally while on the floor like that. First, raise your head.”

“No, first of all, I apologize——”

“If you keep your head down there, I won’t be able to take off my shoes, okay? Isn’t it proper behavior for a maid to welcome her master first?”

When Ayano stubbornly refused to raise her head, Masachika lectured her on the courtesy of a maid. By doing so, he tried to force her off her knees..... This childhood friend's attitude was beyond Masachika's imagination.

"Please go ahead and step over my body."

"Hey, don't mention your sexual kinks so casually. The only people who can say, "step on me," are the protagonist's friend character who makes a sacrifice."

"In other words, I should start by being a sacrifice.....?"

"No."

After denying it with a straight face, Masachika squatted down with a sigh. Then, after making a conscious effort to look cool-headed, he called out in a serious voice.

"Ayano."

"!"

Perhaps sensing something from the sound of Masachika's voice, Ayano looked up with some discretion. Looking directly into her face, Masachika quietly asked, "Why should the master have to be told what to do by the maid?"

"!"

"Stand up."

"Yes!"

At Masachika's instruction, Ayano stood up as if she were being played with. After seeing this, Masachika finally took off his shoes and said as he walked up the entranceway.

"If you're apologizing for what happened during the quiz show, you don't have to. It was a contest, and we both played fair. If you had cut corners because you thought I was being modest, I might have been offended."

"Oh, no, it's nothing like that....."

“Right? Then you don’t need to apologize.”

With that said, Ayano lightly tapped him on the shoulder, while accepting Masachika’s bag,

“Then, about that secret technique in the classroom——”

“Don’t talk about that.”

Masachika tried to gouge out the wound of a memory with a casual smile as Ayano interrupted him with a straight face. Masachika then quickly headed for the washroom to prevent her from saying anything more. After washing his hands and gargling, he was about to return to his room when Ayano handed him a washbowl containing a wet towel.

“Please, come in and wipe your sweat off.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Masachika thanked her for this honestly, and after taking off his uniform in his room, he wiped himself with a wet towel. Then, just as Masachika changed into his loungewear, there was a knock at the door.

“Excuse me.”

Ayano, who came in with her head bowed, quickly collected the wet towel and the uniform that Masachika had taken off.

“No, it’s okay……”

“No, I was on my way to the washroom anyway.”

“Well, thanks.”

“You’re too kind.”

As she answered, Ayano casually explored the breast pocket of the shirt she retrieved to make sure she didn’t accidentally wash something strange. Her movement stopped for a moment, and Ayano’s right hand pulled a piece of paper from the breast pocket. No, it was not a piece of paper, but the picture Masachika took with Nonoa, taken at the maid cafe…… that Sayaka and Nonoa ran.

“Oh, that’s——”

Masachika, realizing this fact, reflexively raised his voice. It was at the same time that Ayano turned it over in her hand and saw the front of the photograph.

Instantly, Ayano's pupils dilated.

"Scary!"

Ayano stared at the photograph with expressionless, unfocused eyes..... At any rate, Ayano's stares could have burned a few holes into the photograph. This bizarre sight sent a sense of danger up Masachika's spine.

(Huh? Isn't this like a situation where a businessman is caught having a hostess club's card by his wife?)

Reminiscent of a situation he may or may not have seen in a daytime TV drama, Masachika remained calm and explained the situation.

"Oh~, that's from when I went to Class D and F's exhibition. We just went out to eat, but I wasted no time in showing my good luck and won their lottery to get that photograph."

Then Ayano, who may or may not have been listening to Masachika's testimony, showed no particular reaction and muttered a few words with her..... pitch-black eyes.

".....I understand."

"No, I'm sorry, stop, okay? It's scary when someone says 'I understand' with dilated pupils. The reality is that you don't understand at all, right?"

Without even looking at Masachika, who said so in a detached manner, Ayano replied in an emotionless tone of voice.

"No..... It's just that you weren't satisfied with my service."

"No, listen to me. It's not like I wasn't satisfied with your work and cheated on you with another maid or anything like that....."

As Masachika made his excuse, Ayano slowly turned her head to look at him. Reassured that at least she seemed to be keeping her composure enough to listen to what was being said as instructed,

Masachika explained to her that it was wrong to associate maids at maid cafes with real, actual maids.

“……that’s what I’m saying. Understand?”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Well, that’s good to hear.”

Masachika was relieved when Ayano slowly nodded her head, but it was still too early to…… reassure her.

“I’ve failed as a maid by making my master feel so uncomfortable after all…….!”

“Did you not listen to me!?”

As Masachika screamed, Ayano, with her still pitch-black eyes, proposed in a feigned voice out of courtesy.

“Tonight…… I’ll serve you with all my might, right? Master.”

A declaration of service by a cute maid. This was another situation that would be exciting for any otaku, but when Masachika heard it…… he felt a shiver run down his spine.

◇

“……”

“……”

“……Oh, there’s a new movie that was released.”

“……”

(I can’t concentrate!)

While randomly surfing the Internet on his computer, Masachika couldn’t help but be curious about what was going on behind him. At first Masachika was alarmed by the phrase “serve you with all my might,” but fortunately, Ayano had not acted particularly excessively so

far. She was just..... there all the time, just in the corner of the room. Not a single noise, just being there the whole time.

However, as if by surprise, Masachika sensed no sign of her or even her gaze. Even though he didn't feel her presence, he still didn't feel comfortable because he knew she was there. And when Masachika turned around, he saw dark eyes staring back at him. Was this a horror story?

(Seriously, I can't relax.....! Does Yuki always spend her time like this? I'm surprised she's okay with it.....)

He feared his sister's brazenness, but quickly reconsidered, "No."

(Come to think of it, I used to be okay with it too. I guess I was used to it because..... we grew up together.)

Since leaving the Suou family, Masachika had taken for granted that he was usually home alone. In addition, despite being childhood friends, Masachika and Ayano were now at an age where they were conscious of each other as a boy and a girl. Masachika was not usually aware of such things, but it is still not the same as dealing with Yuki.

(If it was her, I wouldn't mind her being in the room..... Or rather, I don't feel like playing around Ayano when she's trying to work as hard as she can.....)

As a quirk, Masachika did not have the brazenness to leave his childhood friend standing on a stick waiting for him while reading manga in bed without a care in the world. Then Masachika thought, if he could give Ayano a break.

"Ayano~?"

"Yes, Master."

"You're not going to have anything on your hands if you're sticking around in a place like this, are you? I'm just a regular guy with a lot of free time on my hands..... Like I said, you can do whatever you want, okay?"

"You see, this is what I like to do."

"Ah, yes....."

It had been like this for a while now, and there was nothing Masachika could do about it.

“I mean, this “Master” thing is……”

“……anything I can help you with, Master?”

“No, it’s simply that I don’t feel at home……”

When he said this brusquely, Ayano opened her eyes and gazed at Masachika.

“But…… you had them call you that, didn’t you? Women other than myself. With Master.”

“Oh, that’s where you get all butthurt?”

Masachika asked back with a straight face, but Ayano gave no answer. No, if you listened carefully, she mumbled something in her mouth. He could not hear it because of the distance, but…… The sight of a beautiful girl with a doll-like expressionless face and dilated pupils muttering something in her mouth was terrifying. No matter how you look at it, it looked like she was chanting a curse, and Masachika turned silently to face forward.

(Hah~, I can’t relax.)

Musing internally, Masachika nonchalantly turned his shoulder. Immediately, a presence shook behind him, sending a shiver of danger down Masachika’s spine. Immediately after,

“Master.”

“O—Oh.”

A voice came from right behind him, causing Masachika to awkwardly flinch and look up in that direction. Then, Ayano, with her still pitch-black eyes, spoke quietly with a mysterious force.

“I can give you a massage if you like.”

“……A massage?”

“Yes, master seems to have stiff shoulders. I know you’ve been busy lately, and if you don’t mind.”

“A—Ah~..... I see.”

She wanted to do a shoulder massage for her master, who was exhausted. This was simply gratifying and seemed like a good thing to accept. But.....

(Yeah, I’ve got a bad feeling about this.)

Considering the earlier declaration of “I’ll serve you with all my might,” Masachika couldn’t help but feel wary as an otaku. He didn’t feel like it was going to be just a massage.

“Yeah, I guess so..... Hmmm~”

“I have been doing this for Yuki on a regular basis and it has been very well received!”

“Even for Yuki? Oh, if that’s what you mean..... it should be fine?”

Masachika reconsidered taking the option to relieve Ayano’s desire for service. But if it was a massage she usually did with Yuki, it shouldn’t be something crazy.....

“Now, please lie down on the bed.”

(I still have a bad feeling about this.)

Masachika almost unintentionally blurted out a retort.

“No, we can just use a chair if you just want to massage my shoulders.....”

“Since we are here, let’s relieve the stiffness all over your body!”

“Whoa, all over, huh?”

“Yes, it’ll make you feel refreshed, won’t it?”

“Are you saying that on purpose?”

“? What do you mean?”

Masachika stared at Ayano with a doubtful look on his face. However, Masachika couldn’t read her inner feelings through her blank expression, and her eyes, which were the only things that were supposed to show emotion, were now so black that he couldn’t decipher anything.

(I mean, I'm still scared. Hey, why are they pitch black? What kind of emotion is that?)

Somehow, Masachika felt that if he refused, it would be even worse, so he slumped onto the bed cautiously. Then Ayano said, "Excuse me," and straddled on his back, causing Masachika to tense up.

(No, I'm fine. Even if someone else pressed their body against me in some strange way, or touched me in some inappropriate way, I don't care! I don't care!)

Masachika was prepared to take on the challenge of being massaged by Ayano, but..... as it turned out, it was a very wholesome massage. In particular, no excessive physical contact took place.

"Oh..... That felt good."

"That's good to know."

"Oh, thank you. And sorry, for being a rotten otaku."

"?"

Masachika sensed that Ayano had a doubtful look on her face, but since he felt nothing but guilt, he didn't continue further. There was no way he could say that he was expecting to have his lower body relieved as well after receiving a massage.

"Then I'll prepare dinner, shall I?"

"Oh, thanks....."

"No problem. Well then..."

Masachika leaned back on the bed, watching from the corner of his vision as Ayano left without a sound.

His shoulders and hips, which had been wrung out by Ayano, had a pleasant warmth, and Masachika somehow couldn't bring himself to move them. When Masachika wanted to be immersed in that pleasant feeling, he relaxed, and the pleasant heat spread throughout his body, making his eyelids heavy.....

"——Dear Master."

“Hmm?”

A light shake on his shoulder made him open his eyes, and Masachika felt a little freaked out to see Ayano peering at him with her pitch black eyes.

“……Ayano?”

“Yes, it’s me, Ayano, Master.”

“……sorry, I must have fallen asleep.”

“You must have been tired. Dinner is ready, would you like to eat now? Or would you like to take a bath first?”

“No, I’ll eat.”

“……At your service, Master.”

It looked like she was going to make some more disturbing remarks, so Masachika got up quickly. Moving directly into the living room, the food was already laid out on the table.

“You looked tired, so I decided to make cold shabu-shabu[3].”

“Oh, nice. It was pretty hot today, even for October, and it was hot…… having to cosplay too.”

However, there was one point of concern.

“……why just for me?”

When Masachika asked Ayano this, looking at the table with only one meal prepared, she answered as if the answer was second nature.

“The maid cannot eat at the same table as the master.”

“No, please do. You do it all the time.”

“Tonight I am different.”

“It’s kind of cool when you put it that way.”

“……please don’t mind if it takes me a while to boil the meat again.”

Saying this, she pulled out a chair, and Masachika had no choice but to sit down. Ayano then went to the rice cooker in the kitchen.

“How much rice would you like?”

“Yeah, well, the usual.”

Then, she quickly brought in the rice, fluffing it up nicely. After pouring more water into the glass, she naturally stood at an angle behind Masachika.

“……Itadakimasu.”

“Then, please go ahead.”

The pork shabu and raw vegetables were mixed with ponzu[4] as Masachika brought them to his mouth. When combined with hot white rice, the result was a perfect collaboration in the mouth.

“……Delicious.”

“Thank you.”

Yes, it was definitely delicious. However, Masachika was still concerned about her pitch-black eyes. The napkin and condiments were placed at his fingertips with exquisite timing, water and rice were refilled, and the dishes were smartly put away after he had finished eating. It would have been the most perfect serving, but…… Masachika was not able to concentrate on the food.

(Hmmm~, this should have been the norm from when I was in the Suou household…… I knew my senses were becoming more commonplace.)

While he was thinking about this, a voice called out to him from an angle behind him.

“Master, if you don’t mind, I’d like to give you an ear cleaning.”

“My ears?”

“Yes.”

As she asked, “How would you like it?”, Ayano sat down in the chair next to Masachika and patted her own thighs, saying, “Go ahead.”

(Let's see..... I have no choice, right?)

With her pitch-black eyes staring at him intently as ever, Masachika had no choice but to not refuse.

"Then..... I'll take you up on that offer."

As he said this, Masachika placed his head on Ayano's thighs, and immediately the soft texture of her thighs and the soft smell of her body stimulated his nostrils.

(Ugh..... Rather, the combination of someone in a maid's uniform giving you an ear cleaning gives off a suspicious atmosphere.....)

As Masachika hardened his body with this thought, a voice said, "Excuse me," followed by the start of ear cleaning.

(Oh..... but, this feels kind of nice too.....)

He didn't know how many years it had been since he had someone cleaned his ears, but it was better than Masachika expected. Ayano's slender fingers lightly stroked his head and cheeks, and the exquisite stimulation of his ears, which were slightly ticklish with a tingling sensation, striked. At first Masachika almost felt an involuntary shiver down his back, but the stimulation became more and more pleasant, and he felt like he wanted it to continue all the way through.

(Ohhhhh~ so good..... How relieving.....)

The warmth of Ayano's body against his cheeks and the comfort of his ear being cleaned made Masachika more and more entranced..... And just then Ayano's hand pulled away.

"Yes, then would you please turn the other way?"

"Yeah? Ahh....."

Feeling more than a little disappointed, Masachika nonchalantly turned his body around. Then, after his vision was filled with Ayano's maid uniform, that's when he finally said, "Hmm?" Masachika thought.

(Huh? Isn't this..... not so bad from a physical standpoint?)

Although it was hard to tell with the maid's uniform, if one thought about it calmly, the tip of his nose was about to be buried in

Ayano's lower abdomen. Isn't this..... a bit of a bad idea, no matter how you looked at it? Just as he thought this, the ear cleaning began again, and the exquisitely tantalizing sensation caused Masachika to relax once again.

(Huh..... Ah, well enough of that.....)

With a loose head, Masachika decided, "If it's bothering, I'll just close my eyes and let Ayano do her thing". The heat and feeling of her uniform's texture rubbing against his cheeks and the tip of his nose made Masachika feel like he was being gently hugged on his head..... He was in a state of bliss.

".....That felt great."

After returning to his room, Masachika muttered to himself. Taking advantage of the fact that Ayano was eating and not in the room, he soaked up the pleasant sensation in his ears. Then, after a while of lounging around..... it suddenly occurred to him.

(Oh yeah, better take a bath while I can.)

At the time, Ayano was probably washing the dishes. The most alarming part of Ayano's Super Service Time (named by Masachika) was the bath. Masachika could foresee that. He predicted that if he were to take a bath when Ayano's hands were free, she would propose and say "I will wash your back".

(The bath water should be heated up soon, so while Ayano is doing the housework I should get in quickly.)

Having decided to do so, Masachika left his room with a change of clothes. While hiding the change of clothes behind his back, he pretended like he just needed to use the toilet and headed for it. Then he put the change of clothes in the changing basket and turned around to close the door just in case Ayano was there as usual.

"Woah!"

"Let me wash your back."

"I knew it!"

Masachika retorted and clicked his tongue at the all-too-predictable turn of events.

“No, you can’t! That’s a bad idea!”

“No problem. I’m ready for anything.”

Without moving an eyebrow at Masachika’s adamant refusal, Ayano began to remove her maid’s uniform on the spot.

“No, no, what are you——”

While he was saying this, her maid’s uniform fell to the floor, and what appeared was the swimsuit that Masachika had seen at the beach. Oh, and knee-high stockings with weapons on them.[5]

(Ummm~, maniac.)

While Masachika was having these stupid thoughts, Ayano removed her “weapons” and stockings as well, and went into the bathroom first.

“Oh, wait——”

Before he could stop himself, the bathroom door closed and Masachika froze.

“……What, can I just go in without worrying?”

Based on the previous situation, it seemed that Ayano wouldn’t budge no matter what. If Masachika doesn’t enter, she would likely end up waiting endlessly in the bathroom.

(Uh, ugh…… I mean if she’s wearing a swimsuit it should be okay? Wait, why did she even have that in the first place? Was it kept in Yuki’s room this whole time?)

While it was a mystery how the swimsuit ended up there, the fact that Ayano was wearing it showed that she had some common sense. In fact, so far, it seemed that Ayano hadn’t done anything indecent, and it had only been Masachika’s unfounded suspicions. There was an incident during summer vacation where Masachika ended up exposing Ayano once, but it seemed like she had learned from that experience. So perhaps… it should be okay to trust Ayano and go along with her until she was satisfied……

(Well, yeah. To be honest, the massage and the ear-cleaning were too good, so now I'm even interested in the idea of getting my back washed.)

Masachika had never had someone wash his back for as long as he could remember. But he couldn't help but be curious about what would happen if Ayano, who had demonstrated such skill in massaging and ear cleaning, were to wash his back. As a result, Masachika undressed after some hesitation and wrapped a towel tightly around his waist before stepping into the bathroom.

Then, he calmly told Ayano, who was crouched behind the bath chair waiting for him.

"You can just wash my back, but after that can you please get out right away?"

"Yes..... If you'd like, would you like me to shampoo your hair as well?"

"Hmm? Oh..... then, please do."

Masachika sat down on the bath chair, trying not to look at Ayano as much as possible. Ayano then quickly started the shower and began washing Masachika's head after the water temperature had risen. And so the shampooing began first.....

(Woah, seriously? This feels so good too.....)

Masachika thought the shampoo service you'd get after getting a haircut at the barber shop was pleasant, but this was way better. Ayano's slender fingers stirred his hair with exquisite force, stimulating his scalp, making him feel very comfortable.

"Are you okay with the intensity?"

"Yeah, it's perfect."

Closing his eyes, Masachika concentrated on the sensation on his head.

(Could it be that Yuki gets this done to her every day.....? If so, I honestly envy you, little sister. No, but with that amount of hair, Ayano would have a hard time.....)

While thinking about such things, the blissful time passed in a blink of an eye. And as expected, once again, nothing indecent happened this time either.

As promised, Ayano washed Masachika's hair and rinsed his back, then quickly left the bathroom. There was never a case of, "Okay, now let's move on to the front..."

(.....yeah, I guess I was thinking too much.)

After taking a bath, Masachika felt awkward and embarrassed in his room. He was too involved in his own offensive fantasies, driven by Ayano's words "serve you with all my might," and his own otaku mindset. Masachika was still a little concerned about her dark eyes and the fact that she called him "master," but Ayano probably just did what she usually did to Yuki, regardless of their gender difference.

Besides, she had prepared a swimsuit... properly taking into account that they were of the opposite sex. Ayano was just taking care of him as much as she could with her pride as a maid, but this rotten otaku brain was all wary and had dubious fantasies about him.....

"Yeah, I'm starting to feel a little like dying☆"

In his mind, the devil Yuki teased him, "You were really expecting something more, weren't you? Huh? You dirty pervert!" and kicked him, while the angel Maria argued "He's just a boy! It can't be helped!" as Masachika reflected on his actions. Then,

"Master, may I?"

"Uh, yeah."

There was a knock at the door, and Masachika straightened his sagging posture.

"Excuse me, Master. I brought you some hot milk."

"Oh, thank you..... for being so hospitable."

When Masachika put the cup he received to his lips, the sweetness of honey and milk spread slightly throughout mouth, and Masachika couldn't help but smile. Somehow it warmed his heart, and Masachika naturally thanked her.

“Thanks, Ayano.”

“No, it’s no big deal.”

“No, not only that…… but also about how you always take care of Yuki.”

“?”

As he felt Ayano’s questioning gaze on him, Masachika continued to stare at the surface of the milk.

“Today, you took care of me to the best of your ability and…… I feel like I now know how much you think about Yuki on a regular basis. When I thought about how hard you always try to take care of Yuki…… I couldn’t help but want to thank you.”

Masachika’s smile turned a little bitter.

“In truth, it actually should be my role to care for Yuki and support her…… I really feel like I’m not a good enough big brother.”

“Such——”

“It’s true. Whatever the reason, it doesn’t change the fact that I pushed Yuki too hard by leaving the Suou family for all the wrong reasons. And even now, I’m trying to make Alya the student body president, not her, because I’m impelled by feelings I don’t understand…… So I guess I’m not even qualified to thank you in the first place.”

Saying this, Masachika looked up at Ayano with a gentle smile that harbored a bit of bitterness. Looking straight into her eyes, Masachika told her sincerely.

“Nevertheless, thank you. You stand by her and think about her more than anyone else. I’m really happy about that. I hope you continue to be…… that girl’s best friend.”

At Masachika’s words, Ayano’s eyes widened. The light returned to her eyes and…… Ayano smiled slightly.

“Don’t say something so bad. Masachika-sama.”

Masachika also smiled in response to the all-encompassing response. An air of calm passed between them, and Masachika took another sip of milk into his mouth.

“This is delicious. Does Yuki like this too?”

“Yes. I am very pleased with the recipe.”

“Well..... Come to think of it, I haven’t heard much about Yuki from you.”

“I will tell you as much as you want.”

“Yeah, sure. Might be nice.”

They smiled at each other as they talked about Yuki for a while. Then, when Masachika’s hot milk ran out, Ayano checked her watch and sat up from the bed.

“I think it’s time to go to bed.”

“Ah, yes..... I have a busy day tomorrow. The hot milk warmed me up just right, so I think I’ll go to bed early today.”

“.....At your service. So, would you like a refill?”

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

Receiving an empty cup from Masachika, Ayano blinked her eyes as if something suddenly occurred to her.

“Oh, Masachika-sama.”

“Hmmm?”

“Would you like a titty pillow?”

“You’re ruining it, you idiot!”

“Yuki is very pleased with it.”

“That stupid sister of mine!!”

Masachika’s roar cut through the calm air. Then Masachika’s phone buzzed, and a message from Yuki saying “I’m sorry” appeared on the screen.

……By the way, Masachika refused the titty pillow. He was very tempted, but he refused with a steel will.

[1]: Referring to the traditional greeting where you kneel down on the tatami mat and have three fingers from each hand touching the tatami mat.

[2]: Yamato Nadeshiko is a term used to describe the “ideal Japanese woman”, or the epitome of traditional beauty standards in Japan. It’s usually used to describe beautiful women with long, straight and black hair.

Dogeza (土下座) is an element of traditional Japanese etiquette which involves kneeling directly on the ground, prostrating oneself while touching one’s head to the floor. This is typically seen in anime when a person begs someone for something, be it a favor or material object.

[3]: Shabu-shabu is a Japanese nabemono hotpot dish of thinly sliced meat and vegetables boiled in water and served with dipping sauces. The term is onomatopoeic, derived from the sound – “swish swish” – emitted when the ingredients are stirred in the cooking pot.

[4]: Ponzu (ポン酢) is a citrus-based sauce commonly used in Japanese cuisine. It is tart, with a thin, watery consistency and nearly colorless.

[5]: The raws didn’t mention this, but based on previous volumes she usually clips sharp pens and pencils to her stockings to use as “weapons.”

Chapter 5 - I'm Feeling Better, In A Way

"Is it okay? Working in the organizing committee."

"I'll be alright. After all, our senpais are very capable."

"Haha, well, the current and former student council president are working well together."

Second day of the school festival. Masachika had invited Takeshi and Hikaru to go around the school grounds together in between working for the executive committee.

"Besides, originally, the main job of the current student council president and vice president is to deal with the Raikokai[1]. So, even if I'm not there, it won't cause much trouble."

"Ahhh, the Raikokai..... are coming today?"

"Do we know specifically who is coming?"

"No, that's the President and Sarashina-senpai's responsibility , so .....I don't know the details either. And to be honest, I'm not really interested."

"Is that so? It seems like a lot of people want to take this opportunity to get to know them somehow."

Masachika cowered as Takeshi continued, "Some people try their best to attract their attention by coming up with creative decorations at the entrance of their classrooms" while turning his attention to the surrounding exhibits.

"I'm just an ordinary citizen whose parents are diplomats."

"No, I think it's quite admirable that your parents are diplomats. .....What's more, it's a good career, right?"

"For this school's standards, it's not that special, I suppose. In fact, there's even a theory that unless you have something like that, you won't even pass the interview for the entrance examination."

“Yeah, well, there’s a rumor that…… admissions are pretty much filtered by family background.”

“And here’s another thing.”

Masachika and Hikaru laughed as Takeshi made a circle with his thumb and forefinger as he said this.

“Well, that’s how it is. But hey, who cares about that kind of talk, right? Anyway, I’m free for a while.”

“I see. Oh, there’s a takoyaki stall over there. I’m gonna go buy some…. What about you two?”

“I’m good.”

“Me too…… Don’t worry about holding back, feel free to buy some.”

“Understood. Well, wait a moment then.”

After saying this, Hikaru went to the takoyaki stall. As Masachika looked at his back without looking at him, Takeshi suddenly smiled and called out to him.

“Well, how was yesterday?”

“Yesterday? You mean the…… quiz game show?”

“No, I don’t! After that, you know…… you had a date with Alya, right?”

“Oh, well, it was not really a date… Were you watching us? You should have said something.”

“Well, yeah, I mean…”

At Masachika’s words, Takeshi smiled vaguely and glanced at Hikaru.

(I see, you tried to call out to us, but Hikaru stopped you.)

Masachika read his intentions correctly and smiled slightly.

“You didn’t have to be so careful.”

“Well, it seemed like there was a good atmosphere between the two of you…. Actually, how is it between you two? Since you’re campaign partners, maybe the two of you had developed that type of relationship?”

What a difficult question to answer.

Although he understood Alisa’s fondness for him, Masachika had little intention of developing a relationship with Alisa. There was also the rational notion that it was risky to bring “colorful” affairs into an election campaign. In addition, Alisa herself did not seem to realize that her liking towards him was romantic in nature. In general, the distance between them was closing, but overall no progress had been made.

“……Well, we get along, but that’s it. We’re not really dating or anything.”

“I see……”

“What? You’re in a hurry to get ahead of me?”

“No, that’s not it! I just——”

“Um~ excuse~ me.”

Then, they were interrupted by a voice from the side, and Takeshi turned with a puzzled expression, saying, “Huh? Me?” Masachika also looked in that direction, where a girl of the same age, who seemed to be an external visitor, stood. She had short hair dyed in a bright color and had a rather adorable appearance. With a slightly upward gaze, the girl shyly asked Takeshi a question.

“We are students from Donano High School, and we are looking for someone to show us around…… If you’d like, could we go around together?”

“What, oh, us?”

“Yes.”

The girl smiled charmingly. The name of the school she told Masachika was the name of a fairly well-known all-girls high school in the area. Masachika looked and saw two other pretty girls standing a short distance away, who appeared to be her companions. Well……

(Ah, I see.)

Masachika guessed when he saw them glancing toward Hikaru. Most likely, their primary interest was in Hikaru. To avoid drawing unnecessary attention from other boys by openly approaching an attractive guy, they deliberately approached during a moment when their main target was away, attempting to fill in the gap, so to speak.....

“Wait, really? No way! Are you serious?!”

Not seeming to notice their thoughts, Takeshi scratched his head, grinning as hard as he could. Clearly smitten, he looked at the three girls one by one and then glanced towards Masachika as if to say, “Man, I’m in trouble.” Then, turning back to the girls, Takeshi brought his hands together in front of his face with a snap.

“Sorry! I’m really happy and honored to be invited, but we actually have girlfriends! We don’t want to get killed out of jealousy, so we can’t join you. I’m really sorry!”

“Eh? Oh, I see... Well, if that’s the case...”

Perhaps I was caught completely by surprise. The girl blinked frequently with a straight face and returned to her friends with a slight tilt of her head. After watching the three of them leave, Masachika called out to Takeshi, who was still holding his hands together.

“Since when did you have a girlfriend?”

“I couldn’t help it, could I~? I couldn’t think of any other way to say no without hurting those girls.”

“Well, I think you made a nice decision there, but were you happy with saying no.....?”

At Masachika’s question, Takeshi turned around with a grimace expression and gritted his teeth as hard as he could.

“Y-You can’t be serious! It’s not faaiir~! Ah, what a waste! This might have been my one and only chance to be popular!”

“No, it’s.....”

Unable to say that it was a misunderstanding, Masachika struggled to find the words to say anything, leaving him speechless.

Meanwhile, Takeshi, who had been holding his head and squirming in front of him, eventually let out a sigh and slumped down in resignation.

“But I’m sure Hikaru wouldn’t like the idea of going around with girls he didn’t know..... and you didn’t seem too keen on it either.”

“Yeah, well.....”

“Right? That’s why, well, it’s for the best. Even if we ended up going together, I don’t think I would have done well anyway.”

When Takeshi said that with regret, Masachika sincerely thought, “He’s actually a good person.....”

(Well, I already knew that much..... I hope it pays off for him.)

Why couldn’t he get a girlfriend, even though he was such a good guy who cared deeply for his friends? As Masachika questioned the absurdity of the world, Hikaru came back with takoyaki in his hand.

“Sorry for the wait... Wait, what’s with Takeshi?”

“Moping about the loss of a possible lucky encounter.”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

As Hikaru tilted his head in confusion, a rattling sound nearby interrupted them, followed by a startled, “Ah!”

As they turned their gazes, they saw a female student holding a plastic basket, looking flustered. It seemed that she had collided with someone, and the bouncy balls she was carrying inside the basket had all fallen out. The balls bounced off the ground and the legs of pedestrians, scattering in various directions.

“Oh dear.”

Masachika looked at the scene and wondered for a few moments whether he should go to help.

(It’s a bit far away, and even if I went to help her now..... she might not even care if she lost a few balls in the first place. It would be unnecessary for me to intervene.... and anyway I’m bad with balls.)

In those few moments,

“Hold this for me.”

“Oh.”

Hikaru took action.

After pushing the takoyaki to Masachika, he did not hesitate and moved toward the female student.

He quickly picked up as many balls as he could see, even the ones that had gone under the nearby food stalls. Without hesitation, he got down on the ground to retrieve them, even if his hands and knees got dirty with dust.

When Masachika and Takeshi caught up to them, they had almost finished collecting the fallen balls.

“Oh, thank you. Really.”

“No problem, just be more careful next time.”

Hikaru waved his hand and looked as the female student bowed to him. Seeing this scene, Masachika told Takeshi with a knowing look on his face.

“You see, Takeshi, that’s the type of man who is popular.”

“Damn, I can’t compete against that…….”

“No, I’m not trying to be popular……”

“I understand. But it’s still pretty impressive to be able to act decisively in situations like that”

Seeing Hikaru with a troubled expression again, Masachika praised him without holding back.

Hikaru was always like that. While most people would hesitate for a moment, thinking things like “It could be troublesome” or “I might end up embarrassing myself,” , Hikaru was always the first to extend his hand and help. Even if it was someone he wasn’t comfortable with. Regardless of the other person, he embodied the true meaning of

“helping each other when in need.” Hikaru was a kind-hearted person to the core.

(The two of you…. are really truly nice guys.)

Masachika was proud of his friends. He could say that with all his heart. That’s why…… there were things Masachika couldn’t turn a blind eye to. There were things that he could never, ever pretend never happened……

“….Well then, I should be going soon”

“Oh, okay. See you at rehearsal.”

“Good luck with your committee work.”

“Oh!”

After the three of them had been going around together for about 40 minutes, Masachika left them and headed for the club building. However, instead of entering the club building, he went around to the back. There were no exhibitions or stalls in that area, so only those who got lost would venture there. Underneath a large tree at the back, precisely in a blind spot from the windows of the club building, the person he was supposed to meet was waiting.

A girl stood there, wearing a cap pulled down low to hide her face. As Masachika approached her, he called out in a calm voice.

“Yo, Shirotori.”

A cold greeting. There was no “Sorry I made you wait” or "Sorry for calling you out,” it was far from friendly. In response, the girl also responded with a gaze that lacked any trace of friendliness.

“……What do you want?”

The name of the girl who asked curtly was Nao Shiratori. She was a former student of Seirei Academy who transferred to another school before the second semester, and until just a little over a month ago, she was the vocalist of Luminaz, the band which Takeshi and Hikaru were originally a part of. She was also the one who caused a terrible scene when she left, causing the band to collapse.

“Why did you go as far as using something like this to call me out….. What’s your intention?”

With her unfriendly attitude intact, Nao took out an envelope from her pocket. It was entrusted by Masachika to Nao’s former homeroom teacher.

In fact, Masachika, who had doubts about the band’s collapse, had been looking for Nao, who might know the truth about it. However, Nao had changed her smartphone number when she transferred to a new school and deleted her SNS account, so he could not contact her at all. Even with Masachika’s various contacts, she was completely missing and out of touch.

Masachika then made a plan to contact Nao’s former homeroom teacher, who was the only person who could get in touch with Nao. Masachika persuaded the teacher by saying passionately, “I really want to send a letter to Nao who suddenly transferred to another school.” However, what was in the envelope was neither a love letter nor a letter of regret for parting, but an invitation to …… the Seirei Gakuen Academy Festival and a single sentence message.

“What the hell is this? ‘Come or I’ll expose the truth to the members of Luminaz’……”

Masachika cowered with a cold expression as Nao read the message and stared at him.

“You know what I mean, and you know it better than anyone else. That’s why you took me up on the offer and came all the way here.”

“……”

In response to Masachika’s words, Nao remained silent. The two of them locked eyes, as if trying to figure out each other’s next move.

Masachika heard from Takeshi that their band collapsed because Nao told Ryuichi Kasugano, the bass player who she was dating at the time, saying, “We were just going out casually,” and exposed that “she had actually only truly liked Hikaru.” As a result, Ryuichi was severely hurt, and Riho Minase, the keyboardist, was so shocked by the behavior of her childhood friend Nao that they both left the band……. Of course, it was hearsay, so it was uncertain how accurate the details are. However,

precisely because Masachika observed the band from an outsider's perspective, there were certain lies that he could detect.

"You're not in love with Hikaru, are you?"

"!"

Nao responded to Masachika's assurance by raising her eyebrows and twisting her mouth.

Seeing this expression, Masachika's theory was only confirmed more.

It was after Nao revealed that she had feelings for Hikaru after Riho revealed that, "Nao said there was someone she liked in the band when she joined." This was something that Masachika directly learned from Riho after the band had already disbanded. When Nao joined the band as the fifth member, she told Riho about her ulterior motive, and those words were what she shared with Masachika.

Riho didn't seem to notice, but Masachika immediately realized the intention behind that conversation. It was a way to deter Riho. If Nao simply wanted to join the band, her motivation could have been as simple as "I want to be in a band with Riho." There was no need for her to confess her romantic feelings unless it was a tactic to sabotage any potential relationship between Riho and someone else. Judging from the subsequent events, it was likely that the "someone" in question was Ryuichi.

Normally, it would be a simple story of two childhood friends falling for the same guy. That should be the end of it....

(Listening to Takeshi's story... It's the opposite, isn't it?)

According to Ryuichi, Nao didn't show much affection towards him after they started dating. Was it just her way of hiding her true feelings? No, it didn't make sense for her to intentionally provoke Riho and then become passive. In that case... Perhaps Nao didn't want to lose someone else, not Ryuichi...

"The person you liked was—"

"Stop."

With a hard voice, Nao interrupted Masachika. But Masachika did not stop.

“No, I won’t stop.”

Masachika blithely rebuffed Nao’s clear protest. Then he took a step closer to Nao and said the decisive words.

“The one you were in love with..... wasn’t Hikaru nor Ryuichi, but Minase.”

“.....!”

Nao’s eyes flashed with anger at Masachika’s assertion, but Masachika was undaunted, and he confronted her with his own theory.

“The reason you went out with Ryuichi was because Minase had feelings for him. When you found out about Minase’s love for him, you joined the band and went out with Ryuichi out of the selfish desire not to have Minase taken away from you. Isn’t that right?”

In response to Masachika’s confident question, Nao opened her mouth, seemingly unable to find any words. She opened and closed her mouth several times before turning her head down. After that, Nao’s shoulders trembled for a while as if she was trying to hold something in, and then she answered in a squeaky voice.

“.....Yes.”

And with that as a trigger, Nao opened up and admitted her true feelings.

“Yes, I do! I have always loved Riho! I’ve been with her since I was a little girl, and I’ve always protected her! Riho was the best for me, and I was the best for Riho! And yet.....!”

Gritting her teeth and shaking her voice, Nao stared furiously at the ground. Kicking the ground with the toe of her shoe, Nao screamed, her chest heaving.

“But Riho fell in love with Ryuichi! Even though she said she was afraid of men! Ah, mouuu!”

“.....”

"……So, in response, you went out with Ryuichi, whom you didn't really like?"

"Yes, I would rather lose my Riho than let her be deceived by a man! If it was like that, it didn't matter anymore!"

It is a distorted…… but pure love for a childhood friend of the same sex. After howling furiously, Nao's face contorted into a crumpled expression. The expression she now showed was a mix of frustration and regret.

"But when we started going out…… Ryuichi was a really nice guy …… and even though I'm like this, he was very kind to me, and he said he really liked me……. I thought I could understand why Riho would like someone like this……."

A single tear spilled from Nao's right eye as she confessed. Wiping it away with her hand, Nao continued with sobs.

"Riho was still the same, kind as ever…. She always would say with a smile, 'I'm rooting for the both of you.' Even though she liked him first…. Both Ryuichi and Riho are incredibly kind, when on the other hand I've only deceived and hurt both of them…. It's all my fault, but I don't know what to do anymore…."

As Nao spoke, covering her eyes with both hands and almost spitting out her words like blood, Masachika closed his eyes.

Surrounded by kind-hearted people, Masachika could only imagine the torment of continuously spewing lies to them. At first, it was simply a lie born out of the desperate desire to not lose the person they cared for. But as they continued to tell lies to protect those lies, they found themselves gradually engulfed in falsehoods, while their four kind-hearted companions remained untainted. Behind the smiles directed at their friends, they must have endured countless struggles and regrets. How much disappointment and self-loathing they must have felt towards themselves was something Masachika could only imagine.

And when everything was about to be revealed, Nao told a final lie to hide her biggest secret…… her love for Riho. She uttered the lie that she had feelings for Hikaru, pretending that she had harbored romantic affection for him.

(Well, well, I can't blame you.....)

For Nao, her love for Riho was something she wanted to protect and keep hidden, no matter what else she had to do. Even if it meant giving herself up to a man she didn't even like. If that was the case.....

Masachika had no intention of blaming Nao.

It was often said that a person's true nature comes out when he or she is cornered, but Masachika believed this to be false. When a person is really cornered, the first thing that comes out is not their true nature but their instincts. It was the fundamental defense instinct of living creatures to protect themselves. Not many people could overcome this feeling with reason. That was why Masachika's heart could not blame Nao for lying in the end when she was cornered. But.....

"What about the remaining four?"

"..."

Nevertheless, one should not look away from it.

"Maybe it's fine for you to run away. However, you know, those four people are still being affected by what happened back then."

"....."

This information was probably the last thing Nao wanted to hear. But, knowing this, Masachika confronted her with the reality of the situation.

Ryuichi and Minase had stopped showing up at the light music club and had both not spoken to Hikaru since that incident. To be honest, Masachika couldn't stand to watch it. The three of them used to be such good friends, but now treated each other like they didn't exist.

"Oh, well....."

He heard Takeshi still goes to see Makino and Ryuichi every now and then.

"Takeshi still seems to be going to see Ryuichi and Minase every now and then. However, he seems to be troubled by it. He acts as if nothing has changed on the surface, but he actually looks quite worn

out. He's always been someone who cared deeply about his friends more than anyone else."

"....."

At Masachika's words, Nao looked down deeply. After a brief silence, she murmured and asked,

"What about Riho?"

In response to that brief question, Masa honestly stated the facts while thinking to himself, "So Riho is still the top priority after all."

"As you know, Minase is naturally someone with a small circle of friends. Now that she's no longer part of the light music club, she's completely isolated. I've heard that she attends classes with a gloomy expression, doesn't talk to anyone, and then quickly goes home after."

"Uuu."

Masachika quietly asked Nao, who bit her lip while keeping her face down.

"Did you really think that Minase and Ryuichi would get together if you were gone?"

"!"

"How can that be? Ryuichi is not the type to jump from woman to woman so easily, and Minase—"

"I already know that even without you telling me!"

At that moment, Nao looked up and glared at Masachika.

"What are you talking about? Who do you think you are? Who the hell do you think you are?"

Masachika felt as if he had been doused with cold water with these words. He then looked back at his own words and actions, and suddenly came to himself.

(Hey, why am I being so sarcastic?)

He had no intention to blame her in his mind, but he found himself saying things that struck a nerve within Nao. He had intended to

convey only the facts, but in this case, it was as if he had half-jammed her. Masachika was astonished to realize this now.

(No, no. I didn't mean to say this……)

Gazing down, Masachika reset his mind once and searched for the words he really needed to convey.

"……Indeed, I'm just an outsider. I have nothing to do with the band and have no right to interfere."

"……"

But…… I definitely don't think the five of you should be left the way you guys are."

"! Kuh."

Masachika carefully talked to Nao, who gritted her teeth and turned away.

"You're okay with this? You'll leave all of them with a misunderstanding."

"……"

"I say this because I've been there myself…… The worst form of breaking off with the ones you care about is the one that makes you blind to all the good and happy memories you had before it."

Just as Masachika, not long ago, continued to seal his memories of Maa-chan in the back of his mind as unpleasant memories. Now that the misunderstanding was cleared up, he had nothing but regrets about that.

(Well, that's another thing I can't say about…… can I?)

As his head cooled, so did his heart, and there Masachika turned on his heel. Then, knowing it was none of his business, he gave a final advice over his back.

"As I said before, I'm just an outsider. I don't know who you guys are, the relationships between yourselves, or any of the specific details. So I'm not going to tell you what to do…… but if things continue as they

are now, the band will end up being the worst memory of the five of you, you know? Especially for Ryuichi and Minase."

After saying that, Masachika left the place without looking back. He entered the club building and headed upward to avoid people. He climbed over the barrier in front of the stairs and went up the stairs leading to the rooftop and fell on his back after landing at the top of the stairs.

"Haa……"

A deep, heavy sigh exhaled from his cold chest.

"……Why did I say such an accusatory thing?"

He talked to himself in the form of a question, but the answer came to him. It was because Masachika had always been angry with Takeshi and Hikaru being hurt.

Masachika really thought that the five band members should not be separated from each other like that. For that reason, he thought he should persuade Nao to get the five of them back to talking terms. That, he had no regrets about.

"What I regret is that…… I pushed and hurt Nao more than necessary. It's that I, an outsider, took my anger out on Nao, leaving the injured party aside. And I thought I was doing it…… calmly."

But in reality, he was not calm. The anger that had been growing in Masachika after his two precious best friends had been hurt had been like a live fire inside him for a long time, and it had made him aggressive toward Nao, which was expressed in his words.

(Was it really necessary to send such a threatening message and expose the secret in front of the person who wanted to keep it hidden… Did I really think it was necessary to make them taste even a fraction of the pain that Takeshi and Hikaru experienced?)

Masachika bit his teeth as Nao's gaze as those thoughts came to his mind. He felt a strong sense of regret and self-loathing. That was all Masachika could think of right now.

"Who do I think I am…… really? Acting so presumptuously as an outsider with no connection, what have I done?"

Someone had to do it. But he didn't mean to be heroic. If Masachika had done nothing, the incident would have faded away and been buried in time. It was Masachika's ego that dug it up and exposed its hidden contents. Masachika thought it was the right thing to do, and he did it even though he was not asked to do so by anyone. That's all it was. However... looking back now, it seemed like it was just unnecessary meddling.

Even if Masachika had done nothing, those five may have eventually reconciled in some way. Just as Masachika and Maria were destined to meet again and resolve their past misunderstanding.

If there was a solid bond among those five, then surely...

(That's right! To me, she was just an acquaintance, but to Takeshi and Hikaru, Shiratori is a friend!)

Then Masachika became even more depressed as he realized that he had hurt a "friend of a friend."

(Ah..... this is bad. I feel like dying..... I'll have to apologize to Shiratori later)

His thoughts fell into a complete negative spiral, and Masachika rolled onto his side, clutching his head. As it was, he was feeling endlessly depressed...

"Kuze?"

Masachika was about to leave..... when he heard a voice from below that he was not supposed to hear, and he jerked up. Then his eyes met those of Maria, who was peering at him from the floor one level below, and his heart leapt.

"What's wrong, Masha-san?"

"I happened to see Kuze-kun, who looked kind of gloomy, and I was curious..... so I followed you."

Saying this in a concerned voice, Maria went up the stairs and sat down next to Masachika. She then looked at Masachika with concerned eyes.

"What's wrong?"

Masachika returned with silence in response to that question, which was filled with nothing but pure concern. Still, Maria did not rush him, but gently wrapped her hands around his fists, which were clenched in his lap.

Slightly moved by the warm, gentle touch, Masachika blurted out a reply with a grim expression on his face.

“I hurt someone.”

“I see. Why did you do it?”

“They hurt my friends..... No.”

Shaking his head from side to side, Masachika reiterated.

“I got angry because my friends were hurt, and without considering the circumstances of the person involved, I directed my anger at them. Even though they had their reasons.... I should have understood those reasons and instead, I let my anger dig into their wounds.”

When he said that much in one breath, Masachika laughed to himself.

“I’m..... feeling a bit sorry now that I screwed up. I’m sure I’ll be fine as soon as I feel better, so don’t mind me.”

Maria stared at Masachika with a serious expression on her face as he said this in a light tone of voice. Then..... she slowly got up on her knees and hugged Masachika’s head tightly from the side.

“There, there.”

A further gentle pat on the head confused Masachika.

“.....Why? Um, why are you hugging me?”

“Kuze-kun seems to be hurt. That’s why I’m comforting him.”

“Well, did you listen to what I just said? This whole situation is completely my fault, and I was just reflecting on my actions based on my emotions.....”

“So you have no right to be comforted?”

"!"

Having hit the nail on the head with her gentle voice, Masachika was at a loss for words.

Perhaps realizing by his reaction that she had hit the bull's-eye, Maria continued with a small smile.

"So, Kuze-kun, that's what you think, huh~? But you know what? It doesn't matter to me whether you have the right or not!"

"……Oh."

Masachika was overwhelmed by Maria's declaration that she was going her own way, as if to say, "How do you like it?"

"It doesn't matter how Kuze-kun feels! I'm just spoiling you because I want to, that's all!"

"I see."

Masachika couldn't say anything else after being told that clearly.

(If Masha wants to do this, I guess I have no choice now~)

As a sense of resignation and indifference welled up within him, Masachika's gaze became distant. While gently stroking his head, Maria spoke to him.

"Kuze, you've never taken advantage of others, have you? It's as if you don't think you have the right to take advantage of anyone."

"……"

Maria's sharp statement left Masachika speechless. It was true. He had forced his sister to work hard and then lead a lazy, self-defeating life, so he could not allow himself to be spoiled by anyone. He had always thought so.

"When I see you like that, Kuze, my heart feels tight. It feels like a mix of pain and longing, and it makes me want to spoil you so much."

"……Huh, I see."

Masachika responded with a half-smile and a curt reply to the words that made his back tingle. However, Maria seemed to see through Masachika's shyness and gave a small laugh.

"If you cannot forgive yourself, I will forgive you. If you end up hurting yourself, I want to protect you from the pain."

As if to prove her words, Maria continued gently, slowly patting Masachika's head.

"Please, don't say things like that. Since the day we met at that park, you have always been an important person to me. So…. don't force yourself to be strong. Don't try to endure it alone."

Those last words resonated deeply in Masachika's heart.

(Ah, this person….)

Maybe she really does understand. Maybe she understood Masachika's weakness, his mistakes, and everything else, and was trying to gently wrap her arms around him.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah."

"I see…."

"….Yeah."

A conversation that wasn't really a conversation. But he was sure that Maria was getting the message. Masachika closed his eyes and rested his body in Maria's arms. She responded with a smile to Masachika's sweetness as much as she could.

How much time has passed since then? Masachika, feeling a little calmer, opened his eyes.

"I feel like I've always been spoiled by you, Masha."

"Huh? Is that so?"

"Yes…… I think I've always relied on your kindness."

Since the day he met Maria again in that park, Masachika had been recalling his memories of Maa-chan from time to time.

The Maa-chan in his memories was always cheerful, kind, and warm..... He was saved by such a Maa-chan. He honestly thought so now.

“I see..... But it’s the same for both of us, you know. I received a lot of kindness from Saa-kun, too.”

“Haha, is that right?”

“Yeah, right. Too many to count.”

Maria said so, but Masachika was sure he had not returned even half of the kindness he had received.

(That promise, too, was never fulfilled in the end.....)

Thinking back to the promise he once made to Maa-chan, which he recalled about a month ago, Masachika felt a little sad.

(I wonder if it’s not too late..... No, it’s definitely too late..... My skills have significantly declined as well.)

He was feeling a little down again, and as if sensing this, Maria’s squeezing force increased..... and Masachika felt a bit embarrassed.

“Well, setting that aside for a moment. It’s about time I go.....”

“Hmm? Why is that? You can rely on me even more, you know?”

“Well, this position is a bit.....”

Or rather, Masachika was quite conscious of a certain heavy weight on his shoulder. And his right ear feeling the rhythm of Maria’s heartbeat was... well, it was a kind of happiness.

“Ah.....”

Seeing how Masachika avoided making direct references and spoke vaguely, Maria wore a half-troubled, half-blushing smile and separated herself from him.

“Mouu, Kuze-kun.....”

“Sorry.”

“Mmm, well, you’re a boy, aren’t you? It can’t be helped~”

When Masachika nodded his head in agreement, Maria opened her arms with a smile filled with the compassion of a holy mother.

“I don’t mind, Kuze-kun. Come here.”

“No, no, that’s…”

“Oh, I see. You can’t ask for affection yourself. Then how about I come to you~?”

“N-No, wait—!”

Startled, as he tried to push her away, he was quickly captured by Maria’s arms as she leaned forward. And then—Masachika experienced an overwhelming force of motherhood.

——— Masachika learned about the violence of motherhood.

“.....That was intense.”

Masachika, who had been forcibly drowned in motherhood at the hands of Maria, was heading to the music room with somewhat unsteady steps. The band was about to have their final rehearsal for the live performance..... but his mind wasn’t focused on that at the moment.

It was so amazing that all his regrets and sense of self-loathing were completely wiped away. It was so amazing that he was exhausted.

(On the contrary, I wonder how Marsha was so lively and energetic...)

While Masachika was drained of energy, Maria, whom he parted from in front of the stairs, seemed to be overflowing with energy. Perhaps, indulging her desire to pamper him had served as a stress reliever?

(Oh no... Could it be that every time I feel down in front of Masha, this is how it ends up? If that’s the case..... I have a feeling that someday, it’s going to be a serious problem.)

A mysterious sense of danger struck Masachika, sending shivers down his spine. At that moment, his eyes met Yuki’s from across the hall.

“Yuki.....”

“Masachika-kun.....?”

Masachika straightened his back in a hurry and pretended to be unconcerned. However, Yuki raises her eyebrows at Masachika suspiciously and walks up to him with an archaic smile on her face.

“Masachika, I see you are here.”

“Huh?”

“There was a request for additional equipment. Can you help with it?”

“Ah, yeah.”

Pressured by her ironclad smile, Masachika followed Yuki to the warehouse. Without any conversation, they arrived at the warehouse, where Yuki unlocked the door and went inside to make sure no one else was there. As soon as she saw no one else in the warehouse, Yuki rushed to Masachika and grabbed him by both arms from the front. Then, looking up at her brother's face from a close distance, Yuki asked with an expression that seemed to indicate a sense of futile danger.

"Onii-chan, are you okay!? Do you need a love beam to cheer you up?"

"I don't need it."

"Lovey-dovey beeeeeam!!"

"I said I don't need it!!"

And so, pampered by a kind onee-san and spoiled by a younger sister..... the care of these two people helped Masachika recover his mood a little.

[1]: As mentioned in previous volumes, the Raikokai are a body of alumni who have strong influence over the school's governing policies as they donate significantly to the school.

Chapter 6 - Combat Strength Is Important, Right?

“It’s perfect, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I think that was pretty good.”

After the last rehearsal before the live performance, Takeshi and Hikaru voiced their satisfaction. For once, no comments of criticism came from Sayaka and Alisa. And..... Nonoa, without a care in the world, seemed to be content with the situation.

Masachika felt the same way, and with the five of them dressed in costumes produced by Nonoa and with renewed enthusiasm, he honestly thought that the rehearsal was the best rehearsal he had ever attended.

“It was so good..... really.”

As Masachika said this while clapping his hands, Takeshi responded shyly.

“Hey, it feels like we’ve already completed the performance. We’re still in rehearsal, you know?”

“Haha, that’s true, but..... I just wondered how these members managed to come together so well.”

“No, it was Kuzecchi who gathered them.”

“That’s right.”

“.....Oh, right.”

“You actually forgot!”

Takeshi’s comment made Alisa and Sayaka laugh as well. Incidentally, Nonoa’s term for calling Masachika reverted to “Kuzecchi” within a few days. But according to him, it still didn’t feel right.

“The manager has given his blessing! Now that we have the manager’s seal of approval, let’s move backstage a little early!”

“Wait a minute, Takeshi. You still have important things to do.”

“Huh?”

“No..... you guys haven’t decided on a leader yet, have you?”

Masachika said to Takeshi, who was plainly stunned, almost cowering a little. At his words, out of the corner of his eye, Masachika saw Alisa’s expression harden. But Takeshi’s reaction was slow.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh, there was..... that thing.”

“No, it’s important, don’t forget.”

“No, it’s more like I forgot.....”

After scratching his head feeling a bit annoyed, Takeshi looked at Alisa.

“I’d already had a feeling that Alya was the leader of the group.....

“What.....?”

At Takeshi’s words, Alisa’s eyes widened. But then even Hikaru nodded in agreement with Takeshi..

“I agree. I, too, think Alya should be the leader.”

“Eh, Hikaru-kun.....?”

When Alisa turned around in surprise, Hikaru smiled gently and told her.

“Earlier, when Masachika said ‘It’s amazing how this group came together,’ I think Alya-san played a significant role in that. She was the first one to reach out to all the members and that made me happy. And also... when we decided on the band name.”

There, Hikaru scratched his cheek, a little embarrassed.

"While everyone else was suggesting names based on their personal preferences, Alya-san was the only one who proposed a name with a meaningful message for us, right? I believe that it played a part in determining the direction of the band. That’s why... ever since then, in my mind, Alya-san had became our leader"

At Hikaru's words, Alisa's lips pursed and her eyelids trembled as if she was trying to hold something back.

"Hey, Hikaru! You say too many nice things! You make me look like an idiot!"

"Read the air, you idiot."

"That's what I'm talking about, you idiot."

"You're terrible!"

Takeshi shouted in a panic, and Masachika and Hikaru immediately countered. The atmosphere, which was starting to feel good, was spoiled. Alisa, too, looked distracted and laughed.

"Now that we have two votes for Alya..... what about Sayaka and Nonoa?"

As Masachika tried to regain his composure and asked, Sayaka kept her expression unchanged and shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm not so tactless as to object in this."

"Sayachi isn't very honest."

"Did you say something? Nonoa."

"Sayachi isn't very honest."

"You don't need to repeat yourself!"

Masachika and the others laughed at this, another disheartening exchange between the two.

"So, how about Nonoa?"

"I think it's good, don't you think? Nice to meet you, Leader."

Saying this simply, Nonoa fluttered her hand to Alisa. The attention of the five gathered on Alisa, and she shook her eyes. However, after closing her eyes for a moment and changing her expression, she laughed powerfully and clenched her fists.

"Well then, let's go..... and do our best for the first live performance as "Fortitude"! Eiiii!"

Alisa called out, and Masachika and the others…

“Oh~!”

“O-Oh~!”

“Oh?”

“Oh…….oh”

“Oh—.”

“No, don’t half ass it. You guys aren’t in sync at all.”

Immediately after Masachika commented, Alisa’s shoulders contracted as she loosely lowered her fist.

”~~~”

“Look, Alya’s embarrassed! Alya’s embarrassed, you know! She tried, you know? She tried to lead like a leader even though she’d never done it before, right? You guys! Don’t bully the leader!”

“Masachika-kun.”

“Hmm?”

“Please, shut up.”

“Yes.”

◇

“Oh wow, there are quite a few people here…… Dahm, I’m getting nervous.”

“Hahaha, yeah… But I think there will be even more people from here on, you know? It may sound self-centered, but it seems like we’re getting quite a bit of attention.”

“Yeah… Yesterday, I was approached by people here and there as well.”

Twenty minutes before the performance, after moving backstage with his instrument, Takeshi looked toward the stage from offstage and shivered a little, then suddenly looked at Masachika.

“Speaking of which, we met Kiryuin the other day, right? Is there something between you and him, Masachika?”

“Kiryuin, that’s the name of that guy, right? What was he saying? He was way too abstract to understand.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Well, you see… he was quite persistent in asking whether you would be performing on stage or not……”

“Huh? What’s that about? That ‘you’ you’re referring to is me, right?”

“Yeah.”

Masachika tilted his head at the information conveyed by Takeshi. If you asked Masachika, he did feel as if Yusho had asked him something similar directly before, but he didn’t understand the intention behind it at all…….

“Well, you’re the manager, and when I said you wouldn’t be on stage, he had this kind of awkward expression….. Do you have any idea why?”

“……No, I don’t think so.”

“Ugh.”

At that moment, Masachika and Takeshi looked over at the barbed voice that rose unexpectedly. Nonoa, who seemed to have been listening to the conversation, had a half-closed eye expression and opened her mouth slightly in surprise.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well… Junyuusho-chan[1] is so pitiful~…..”

Masachika raised his eyebrows at the words, which were spoken somewhat to himself.

(Junyuusho… the runner-up? Huh? It feels like I’ve heard that before…)

Feeling a tingling sensation in one corner of his brain, Masachika kept his eyes down and searched his memory. But then Takeshi raised his voice and his thoughts were interrupted.

“I’m going to go…… and pick up Kano.”

“Yeah, see you later!”

“Make sure to come back in time!”

“Sure, I’ll be right back.”

Nonoa then spoke up as Takeshi moved away from them.

“I’m going to go get Rea and Leo, too.”

“Who?”

“My little brother and sister.”

“I’m sorry. I’m going to the bathroom for a minute too…….”

“Oi, oi……..”

After raising his eyebrows a bit at the members who were leaving the place one after another, Masachika cowered his shoulders.

“……Well, I guess waiting all the way backstage just makes me weirdly nervous.”

Then Maschika casually turned his head and somehow met eyes with Sayaka. After making eye contact with Masachika, Sayaka shifted her gaze to Alisa, looked diagonally upward, and then abruptly turned on her heel.

“I also want to see Leo and Rea, so I’ll follow Nonoa.”

“Hey, why so suddenly?”

“What are you talking about? I’ll be back in ten minutes.”

“Oh, yeah.”

And just like that, Masachika and Alisa were the only ones left backstage. As he had done something embarrassing the other day that could have been mistaken for a marriage proposal at this very spot, the situation of just the two of them being alone was slightly awkward.

“Well, how should I put it… It feels like the band has some cohesion, but maybe not as much as I thought? What do you think about that, Leader?”

As he jokingly posed the question, there was no response from Alisa. Perplexed, Masachika looked at her face and was taken aback by the expression he saw.

“Alya?”

Alisa looked as if she was about to cry, her eyebrows were furrowed and her eyes strained. When Masachika called out to her in confusion, Alisa’s face fell down and she hid her expression. Masachika’s bewilderment reached its peak when he saw her shoulders shaking slightly.

(What, she’s… crying? W-What should I do? Should I gently embrace her? No, no, that’s only allowed for handsome guys, and besides, I don’t even know why she’s crying. Maybe it’s better to hide her face and comfort her, but…)

After a second of furious conflict, Masachika decided to lend his shoulder as a compromise. Instead of going so far as to hug her, he approached Alisa himself and awkwardly let her bury her head in his shoulder. He then patted her head as gently as possible, just as Maria had done for him.

“What’s wrong? Weren’t you happy to be elected leader?”

As Masachika voiced the deduction he arrived at after thinking, he could see Alisa nodding slightly near his shoulder. Then, a small trembling voice, filled with doubt, reached his ears.

“Did I live up to your expectations……?”

Masachika was shocked by these words. Immediately afterwards, Masachika regretted his own shallowness.

It was Masachika himself who gave Alisa the task of “surpassing Sayaka to become the band leader. In order to live up to those expectations, Alisa had given her all. Yet…… Masachika had selfishly felt jealous of Alisa and did not care about her mental health.

(You’re an idiot, me…! No matter how well she may appear to be doing, she must have been filled with anxiety deep down! Alisa, who had never been too assertive even in the student council, was suddenly desperately trying to communicate with these four people who weren’t even that close to her. Why couldn’t I have taken better care of her!)

How much of a psychological burden must it be for someone, who had never even made friends on her own, to be asked to be friends with four people at the same time? Masachika had completely underestimated that expectation. He even insisted that he would support her as usual, but then became jealous because he thought things were going well without his support…….

“You’re a great partner, more than I could have ever hoped for…… I really respect you. I’m sorry for not being more considerate. I’m so sorry…….”

Alisa silently shook her head at Masachika, who apologized in a voice tinged with contrition.

Again, feeling a bit guilty, Masachika gently continued.

“It’s really great…… that you’re taking part in a group activity, and a leadership role in that, even though you must have been unfamiliar with it…… you’ve done a great job.”

He said this while lightly patting her back, and eventually Alisa began to speak back.

“I have always mistakenly thought that I was the hardest working

and the best.”

Masachika, however, listened to this sudden confession without saying a word.

“But it was just an illusion. I finally realized that at the end of the first semester when I gave my speech at the closing ceremony.”

Hearing this self-detramenting monologue, Masachika’s mind flashed back to Alisa’s speech, in which she straight-up admitted her immaturity.

“While I’m working hard, others are working hard elsewhere, and there is no one in the world with whom I am better at…… everything. In fact, I am a good singer, but I can’t play any instruments. Besides……”

In a slightly calmer tone of voice, Alisa said quietly.

“I can’t see the whole picture and give precise directions like Sayaka, nor can I be flexible and adapt to my surroundings like Nonoa. I can’t be as cheerful and relaxed as Takeshi, and I can’t be as caring as Hikaru. It’s no wonder I have been negligent when it comes to interpersonal relationships.”

Masachika was impressed and admired by her honest strictness toward herself.

“If I wanted to be recognized as a leader by those four people…… I have no choice but to approach them head on. I have to drop the bad tactics and…… work harder than anyone else in that situation to pull everyone along.”

“Yeah…… I see. You worked hard, really hard.”

As he again awkwardly stroked Alisa’s head, Masachika was filled with inner regret. He should have done this earlier. He should have listened to her and cared for her.

（What’s this nonsense about ‘Do I even belong here?’ I’m not just the band’s manager, but also Alya’s partner. If there were no issues with the band, I should have prioritized Aria and considered her feelings first……）

With regret and remorse, Masachika says gently to Alisa.

“I’m happy for you. You’ve been rewarded.”

“……yeah.”

With a small nod, Alisa buried her face in Masachika’s shoulder and murmured.

【I’m glad to be recognized…….】

Masachika did not fully understand the true meaning of those words. She was relieved to be recognized as a leader, and not only that…… However, before he could resolve that question, a lone intruder appeared backstage.

“What?”

The one who stopped in surprise was a male classmate who, oddly enough, was the one who saw them in a similar situation yesterday. He looked at Alisa, who was burying her face in Masachika’s shoulder to hold back tears, and at Masachika, who was gently patting her head.

At the somewhat misleading sight, the boy asked with a half smile.

“Well, did you give her an…… engagement ring?”

“……Just leave it at that, could you?”

“Oh, yes. Take your time…….”

After seeing the boy offstage, Alisa left Masachika with a somewhat disgruntled look on her face.

“Have you calmed down……?”

“Yeah, we’re good to go…….”

After saying this, Alisa put her hand over her eyes.

“I think my eyes got a little red.”

“I’ll be there…… in a little bit. But don’t worry. The audience won’t know and they won’t say anything.”

“Yes.”

When Alisa noded with a small smile, Masachika too regained his composure and brightened up his voice.

At that moment, an explosion sounded from the stage.

◇

Rewinding back a bit to the time when Masachika and the others were having their last rehearsal. Having left their work as executive committee members to other committee members, Touya and Chisaki were greeting the Raikokai, the biggest VIPs of the festival.

“Welcome to our school. I am the current student body President, Touya Kenzaki-san.”

“And I am Chisaki Sarashina, the Vice President.”

Gathered in the student council room, which was currently set up for visitors, were a group of past student body Presidents and Vice Presidents, the Rakokai. Among them was the president of Taniyama Heavy Industries, Sayaka’s father.

“And ..... you are Gensei Suou-san, right? I am familiar with Yuki-san as we often work closely together in the student council.”

“I see.”

Then, there was also Masachika and Yuki’s grandfather, Gensei.

“I’ll show you around the school. Please come this way.”

After a heart-wrenching self-introduction to a group of powerful alumni, Touya began to show them around the school festival.

As he stepped out into the hallway, students who had noticed the Raikokai members made surprised faces before quickly clearing the way.

Even though they may have been tempted to at least say hello to one of the biggest figures in the political and business world[2], whom they have usually only seen on TV or in magazines, they were not allowed to do so.

This was because there was an unwritten rule that students were not allowed to talk to the visiting Raikokai during the school festival. Only the student body President and Vice President were allowed. Instead, other students are only allowed to talk when spoken to, first. Naturally, they were not allowed to form a circle around them or take pictures.

The guests from outside who come as invited guests were to also abide by this rule, either because they were told by other visiting alumni of the school, or because they have been strictly instructed to do so by the invitees.

So, even though there were no particular organizers or bodyguards, the tour went very smoothly.

“Oh my..... We didn’t have greenhouses like that when I was in school.”

“Yes, that one was donated by an alumnus to the gardening and flower arrangement clubs eight years ago.”

“I see, so you grow the floral materials used for flower arrangement there?”

“That’s right.”

“Oh..... Come to think of it, who was it that donated a ring for the boxing club?”

“Ah, that would be President Tamura from Forestine. I’ve heard that he is a big boxing fan himself.”

“Ah, Forestin’s..... I see.”

Looking out the window toward the greenhouse, Touya answered the questions coming from Rakokai without hesitation. Of course, he was only being confident on the outside, but inwardly he was already nervous about what questions would come next. To tell the truth, he was so nervous that he felt like throwing up at any moment.

Originally, Touya was not that thick-skulled. On the contrary, until just a year and a half ago, he was considered so timid and mentally weak that he could not even fathom the idea of finding himself in this situation.

He lacked self-confidence and always felt looked down upon and ridiculed by those around him. It was none other than Chisaki who broke down this shell with her daring way of life.

He admired the way she carried herself without flattering anyone and changed himself. And now..... she was standing next to him, supporting him.

".....?"

Chisaki blinked with curiosity at Touya's gaze.

Drawing courage from her seemingly relaxed demeanor, Touya straightened his posture.

"Would you like to take a closer look?"

"Yes, I do. If you have time."

"I understand. May I have everyone's attention, please?"

With the agreement of the other members of the group, Touya put strength in his stomach and legs and walked with dignity. As Chisaki Sarashina's boyfriend, he wanted to carry himself in a way that wouldn't bring shame to her.

Once he was able to relax a little, his vision naturally widened and he was able to clearly see the faces of the students looking at him. The awe-inspiring gazes directed evoked a sense of deep emotion within him.

Who in the world would have imagined it? Touya, who had always been looked upon with contempt and ridicule, now found himself on the receiving end of respect from all directions. Chisaki, who was once feared by boys, was now looked upon with a sense of trust. When he thought that these were the results of his own efforts, a warm and overwhelming feeling welled up in his chest.

"Touya? What's wrong?"

"No....."

Perhaps sensing something in Touya's expression, Chisaki spoke to him in a whisper.

After answering with a reassuring smile, Touya turned his attention to his surroundings.

“You see that? The gazes directed at us.”

The change in the way they looked at them was incomparable to last year.

The question by Touya was not clear. But as expected of lovers, one might say, Chisaki understood and glanced briefly at their surroundings before quietly nodding in response to Touya’s words. And with an affectionate expression, Touya relaxed his demeanor..

“Though there are two hostile auras.”

“Yeah, sorry, I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“Two men, one in a blue shirt and the other wearing a black hat, in front of the staircase twenty meters ahead.”

“Hold on, what?”

While struggling to catch up with her thoughts, Touya shifted his gaze in the direction Chisaki had indicated. There, he saw the exact duo she had mentioned. As time passed, the distance between them and Touya closed rapidly.

“What do you think we should do?”

In a situation like this, Chisaki’s judgment was more trustworthy than his own. Knowing this, Touya immediately asked her.

“Touya, wait here. Let me handle this for a moment—”

Chisaki said and tried to move, not even pausing to talk. However, the duo moved first.

“!”

The duo they had been eyeing out came running straight at them, and Touya immediately braced himself.

“Hey, you two! Stop——”

At that moment, as Touya shouted a warning to the duo, the man in the blue shirt who was leading the way reached into his handbag.

Touya's heart skipped a beat as he saw a gleaming object being pulled out.

(What…? A weapon… a gun? This can't be real, can it?!)

The situation exceeded all expectations, leaving Touya completely frozen. His brain refused to comprehend the reality before him, rendering him unable to give any commands to his body. However, while Touya was frozen in place, the man aimed the gun he held at Touya—or so it seemed, until Chisaki swiftly kicked the gun out of his hand.

Like a gust of wind, Chisaki's left leg swiftly soared through the air, accurately seizing the barrel of the gun and knocking it out of the man's hand. And then, without hesitation, her right leg followed suit—mercilessly delivering a powerful kick to the man's groin.

"Huh!?"

How hard did she kick him? The man leaped up from the ground, bending his body into the shape of a bow. And the next moment. For the first time in his life, Touya saw an aerial combo in the flesh.

A tremendous uppercut pierced the jaw of an attack. The impact of the uppercut lifted the man further into the air, and his bent body was straightened and stretched into an ideal sandbag position.

Chisaki's relentless five-hit combo was delivered to the now defenseless attacker. Well, it couldn't be confirmed if it was truly a five-hit combo. At least, that's how it appeared to Touya's eyes. It's also worth noting that he could only see up to that point.

"Gegh—, gouu—!."

The man, emitting a voice akin to a crushed frog, slumped to the floor with a squelching sound. The other man, who had been observing the scene with a dumbfounded expression, hastily raised the smartphone he was holding when he noticed Chisaki's gaze turning towards him.

"No, wait, it's not—It's a prank! It's just a prank!"

"Oh, really? Then here's my prank."

She told him mercilessly, and Chisaki carried out the same aerial combo on him.

In just two seconds, the second man also sank to the floor, and the students around them froze, as if they had not caught up with their understanding of the sudden turn of events.

Suddenly, however, one of the boys saw the man holding the gun and shouted.

“Hey, isn’t that him? Isn’t this guy Grealish?”

“What? That famous annoying online influencer?”

“Really? Didn’t he get arrested for surprising a passerby on the street and injuring him?”

“Oh, this pistol’s a toy.”

“No way, is this some kind of prank about assassinating important people? How ridiculous.”

With that voice as the starting point, other students began to move one after another, and Touya also regained his composure. First, he turned around and bowed his head to the members of the Rakokai behind him.

“I apologize for the inconvenience. It seems that someone unfit for this school has infiltrated. I will gladly accept any reprimands, but may I request permission for the Vice President to leave this place for now?”

After receiving an apology from Touya, the oldest and most senior member of the group spoke up on behalf of the others.

“Well, it looks like there was a mismanagement of admission. But, well, try to get things under control now.”

“Thank you!”

After loudly thanking him and raising his head, Touya approached Chisaki and said quickly.

“I’m sorry, Chisaki. Can I leave these guys to you? I need to find out who invited them here..... I’ll handle the Rakokai”

“Understood. Leave them to me. I’ll thoroughly interrogate them in the Disciplinary Committee room."

“……In moderation?”

Touya advised Chisaki, who had already committed a considerable amount of over defense, just to be sure. Then, Chisaki nodded her head attentively.

“I’ll be fine. We’ll just separate them into burnable and unburnable, just like garbage.”

“Is that okay? I mean, separating the burnable from the non-burnable?”

“Huh? Of course, it’s like removing muscles from bones—”

“Ouch! I don’t really understand, but that definitely sounds painful!”

Although he was horrified by the thought of it, Touya tried to let Chisaki take charge of the situation…

「———!」

Startled, Touya raised his head at a loud explosion that seemed to come from somewhere.

◇

Meanwhile, Takeshi, who had left Masachika and his friends, was wandering around the schoolyard with his smartphone in hand, looking for his younger brother.

“Huh? This should be the area… It’s too crowded to tell.”

His younger brother, who was only nine years old, was small. On the other hand, most of the people here were of high school age or older, which made it difficult to spot him in the crowd. As Takeshi looked around, trying to find him, he suddenly saw a figure. It was a familiar figure with a cap on its head. His gaze was drawn to the back of the

figure, and when the figure turned his head to the side, a voice leaked out.

“Eh..... Nao?”

It was a friend who was supposed to have suddenly disappeared a month ago. She turned reflexively at the sound of his voice, and their eyes met.

“Takeshi.....”

“Hey, why.....?”

In the crowd, they looked at each other, one stunned and the other uncomfortable.

And just as Nao was about to say something... a loud explosion echoed from somewhere.

◇

(To think that something like this could actually happen...!)

In front of the source of the bursting screech, Sayaka was biting her teeth and reminiscing about the events of the past week.

“Sayaka, what do you think is the most important thing for a public morals officer?”

At a meeting of the Discipline Committee before the school festival, Sayaka was questioned by Sumire. In response, Sayaka immediately turned her head at high speed, in order to instantly derive the answer that the other party was seeking.

Originally, Sayaka’s reasons for being a member of the public morals committee were extremely selfish. One reason was simply to gain an advantage in her academic record. And the other reason, to be frank, was to leverage students’ weaknesses for her own benefit. Both aimed at elevating her status within the school, ultimately leading to expanding her network of useful connections for the future.

Sayaka was known as a serious and exemplary student, but she did so only because she had no trouble behaving in a way that was able to propel her towards the top. It's not that she particularly loved discipline or hated actions that disrupted it, so she had no intention of imposing the same behavior on others. Or rather, she was not interested in others enough to bother interfering with their behavior.

However, Sayaka was not foolish enough to honestly talk about such things here.

"Yes……."

While stalling for time under the pretense of thinking, Sayaka came up with the best solution in her mind.

"I think it's about being aware of the school rules and the will of the students, and being able to stand between the two without being too biased."

That's it, she thought.

Sayaka's answer was so satisfying to her that she inwardly struck a victory pose. But,

"No, Sayaka-san."

What came back was an outright denial. Sayaka's eyebrows twitched as she observed Sumire, who seemed to be gazing into a distant realm that even she hadn't reached yet.

"The most important thing for a public morals committee member. It is……"

Then, she tells him in a voice that is filled with envy and conviction.

"Combat power."

What was this girl talking about? Sayaka thought sincerely. But she was not so sure that she would be honest enough to say such a thing here.

Above all else, she wasn't foolish.

“Well, I see..... that would mean I don’t meet the requirements.....”

Sumire smiled graciously at Sayaka, who answered sarcastically.

“No, there is no need to solve everything with your own power. In times of emergency where combat power is necessary, if you lack strength yourself, it is also correct to call upon someone with power. In addition, if you can protect the weaker ones within your reach,” Sumire explained while placing the back of her hand on her cheek and smiling.

At the same time, Sayaka thought, “Maybe she watches too much anime.” At that time, Sayaka was both stunned and felt a sense of intimacy with Sumire..... She never thought that such an emergency situation would happen right in front of her eyes.

After leaving the backstage area, Sayaka was wandering around the schoolyard under the pretext of looking for Nonoa. Suddenly, a man exploded a firecracker in front of Sayaka’s eyes.

“Aah!”

“Whoa! What the hell?

While people around him were surprised, the man, to his surprise, kicked a firecracker, which was smoking on the ground, toward the crowd. Naturally, the people ahead of him screamed and ran away.

(W-What’s with that guy?!)

The man was spreading confusion around him, but he himself was strangely expressionless, and his whole body was emitting a strange atmosphere, combined with his cuffed clothes and shaggy mustache.

“If you lack strength yourself, it is also correct to call upon someone with power. In addition, if you can protect the weaker ones within your reach.”

Faced with an emergency situation, Sumire’s words come back to her mind. Right next to Sayaka, a boy of elementary school age was pushed down by a fleeing student.

“Ah!”

Sayaka lifted up the boy who was crouching and whimpering, and swiftly took out her smartphone.

“Are you okay?”

“Oh, uh-huh. Thank you, onee-san.”

Concerned for the boy’s safety, Sayaka called Sumire’s number and dialed as fast as she could.

“Kiryuin Senpai! This is Taniyama! I’m in the B section of the schoolyard.”

Out of the gaze of Sayaka, who was calling for help, the man slowly turned toward the outdoor stage. Then, still with the same bizarre expressionless face, he walked toward it.

◇

“What the hell is……?”

The sudden burst of sound did not end with a single explosion, but continued with a series of loud noises. And in between, the screams of the students can be heard.

“Wha—!”

At the sound of something unusual, Masachika rushed offstage. He looked toward the stage, seeing Alisa following a beat behind him out of the corner of his eye. There, he saw an object that was making a loud noise and scattering smoke, and the students of the dance club moving right and left around it.

“Firecrackers……!?”

Having recognized the source of the commotion, Masachika exclaimed, “Why are there firecrackers here!?” While he was in a state of confusion, another firecracker was thrown onto the stage. Moreover, similar explosions were heard from the audience seats as well.

“Hey! Get off the stage quickly!”

Masachika called out to the dance club on stage, but it seemed that two or three students had fallen and were unable to stand up because of firecrackers thrown into the air during the dance.

(Tsk, I need to find something to shield us from the firecrackers……)

Masachika looked around for some kind of shield to safely rescue the fallen student. Alisa, holding a microphone, ran past him.

“Hey——”

Behind Masachika’s startled shout, Alisa rushed onto the stage. She then looked around the audience and recognized the culprit of the commotion.

Behind the panicked audience, a middle-aged man in a tired outfit pulled out a firecracker from his shoulder bag. Seeing that the man had lit a firecracker and was about to throw it toward the audience, Alisa immediately shouted,

“Stop!!”

A powerful voice amplified by the microphone echoed, causing the man with the firecrackers and the panicked audience to freeze in their tracks. As they instinctively turned their gaze towards the stage, they saw a stunningly beautiful girl with silver hair flowing with a majestic demeanor, standing there with an aura of magnificence.

“Woah……..”

“Princess Alya……”

Everyone, those who knew her and those who did not, were all alike disoriented. A new burst of sound broke through such a few seconds of oblivion and silence.

The lit firecracker exploded in the man’s hand as he stopped moving involuntarily. He hastily dropped it to the ground and turned his gaze, filled with an unsteady restraint, towards Alisa on the stage.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Everyone, please remain calm and evacuate to the other side of the building——”

Alisa ignored him and continued to call out to the audience. A new firecracker was thrown at her.

“Ah——!”

Amidst the tense atmosphere and the watchful eyes of the audience, someone let out a panicked cry as the firecracker approached Alisa. But unexpectedly, a boy darted out from behind and kicked the firecracker mid-air, causing it to fall. The audience couldn’t help but murmur in awe at this action-movie-like feat.

Meanwhile,

(Ouch… that didn’t hurt much! But it was risky. There’s no guarantee it’ll work the next time!)

Masachika, who had knocked away the firecracker with a leaping kick, was sweating profusely despite the brilliance of his technique.

While giving various instructions to the staff, Masachika suddenly saw a firecracker flying towards Alya. Realizing that it would be dangerous to knock it down with his hand, he instinctively extended his leg, but the success was mostly due to luck.

“Alya, are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.”

He checked to see that the firecracker he knocked away had fallen under the stage and then turned his attention to the worried Alisa behind him.

(Actually, if I prioritized Alisa’s safety, I should have just used my hands instead.....)

With a bit of reflection, Masachika thought about what to do next while protecting Alisa behind him.

(Should I directly confront that man? But I can’t leave Alya’s side...)

Masachika looked around to see if there was any other way to get there and..... noticed a group of students who were making their way

through the crowd to get to them. At the head of the group was a schoolgirl with honey coloured hair in a ringlet roll hairstyle.

As soon as Masachika saw this, he grabbed Alisa's microphone and called out.

"Those people in front of the takoyaki stand! Split up and make way on both sides of the street! And those at the entrance there, clear the way!"

The loud instructions were quickly followed by people on the right and left. A beautiful woman dressed in a knight cosplay was sprinting down the two-meter wide path that had been created. Her honey-colored hair fluttered in the wind, and she was accompanied by three girls in similar costumes behind her.

The man realized this, and after showing some signs of agitation at the group running toward him, threw three firecrackers at the group. Sumire, however, showed no sign of timidity, and calmly raised her cloak in front of her face, and ran through the firecrackers without slowing down at all.

Then, as soon as she reached the man, she struck an unannounced blow to the man's back as he turned to flee. Even though it was an imitation sword, it was strong enough to break a man's bones if it struck him seriously. Moreover, even though the one who swung it was a teenage girl, she was a swordsman capable of easily overpowering adult men with a kendo sword.

Naturally, it didn't end there.

The man who tried to escape staggered back with a shrimping body, and the firecracker that fell from his hand still tried to explode in a flash of light. However, two female students running on either side of Sumire forcefully extinguished the fire by cutting the fuse as they passed by. Finally, a petite girl rushed forward and twisted her sword into the man's right side.

"What?"

Receiving a feeble blow, the man sank to the ground. Then, in an instant, he was swiftly restrained by the girls.

“Oh~~”

“So cool……”

“Sumire senpai……!”

The crowd started clapping involuntarily as if they had seen a live action drama. Masachika walked straight through them.

Masachika bowed lightly to Sumire as she came up.

“Thank you, Sumire Senpai.”

“No, I should be the one thanking you. Thanks to you, we were able to handle the situation quickly.”

As Sumire casually adjusted her hair, Masachika inwardly chuckled and thought, “She’s so resilient.”

“Can I leave that man to the public morals committee?”

“Yes, of course…… but we’re having a bit of a problem.”

“Huh?”

"It seems that he’s not the only one. Other uninvited guests have arrived."

“Eh…?”

"They have also appeared before the student council President and onee-chan."

“The President…!?”

“Is the President alright?”

At Alisa’s question, Sumire puffed out her chest proudly.

“Of course, onee-chan was with him.”

“Eh, what?”

“Oh, she means Sarashina-senpai.”

“Hmm? Oh.”

Alisa blinked her eyes repeatedly. It was slightly complicated for her to understand.

“Besides that, there’s some trouble…… apparently some group of people are getting in.”

“So, that’s what happened……”

After saying this, Masachika quickly shook his head from side to side. The investigation of the cause will come later. First, they must deal with the situation that had just occurred.

“Understood. I’ll take care of some matters first and then return to my duties on the organizing committee.”

“Oh, well, then I’ll——”

“Alya, stay here.”

“Huh?”

Turning back to Alisa, who widened her eyes, Masachika told her without hesitation.

“Alya, stay here and calm the crowd down. And then, after consulting with the staff, as soon as things settle down, you guys will go live.”

“Yeah, but……”

But would they proceed with the performance after such an incident? And was Alisa, a member of the student council, not supposed to contribute to resolving the situation? Alisa’s eyes revealed her inner thoughts, but Masachika pierced through with a determined gaze. With a resolute voice, he delivered his message.

“As manager of the band, Fortitude, I am responsible for making sure the show is a success. Besides, I told you, I’ll get rid of anyone who tries to drag you down.”

It was the pledge Masachika had made backstage yesterday. At these words, the hesitation disappeared from Alisa’s eyes, and a powerful radiance dwelled in them.

“So trust me..... and wait for me. I will make sure the show goes on.”

When Masachika closed his mouth after saying this, Alisa clasped her hands in front of her chest and smiled, full of trust.

“Yes, I trust you.”

“Hmm. Alright.”

“Take care.....”

“Yes.”

Returning a strong smile to Alisa, Masachika turned back to Sumire.

“I’m sorry. Can you lend me some help from the public morals committee to act as security for this place?”

“Yes, please give my best regards. Then, Hiiragi-san!”

“Yes.”

Sumire snapped her fingers, and a bespectacled female student appeared behind her. Was she a..... ninja?

“Please work with Alisa Kujou here to calm everyone down.”

“Understood.”

The girl, dressed in masculine attire and with exaggerated theatrics, bowed. However, she was the vice-captain of the girls’ kendo club. She was more than capable as a force to be reckoned with.

“Thank you very much. Sorry for the trouble. Well then, see you later.”

“Yes.”

After thanking Sumire and exchanging one last glance with Alisa, Masachika jumped off the stage to get things under control.

[1]: The nickname Nonoa calls Yusho Kiryuin.

[2]: A bit of context as to why the students are reacting like this: Japan is one of the only few developed countries left to have a more conservative, “Keynesian” economic system when compared to other countries (such as a more neoliberal system found in Western countries). Therefore, Japanese society still has a more outdated and traditional crony-like system of which figures associated with big government or big conglomerates hold a decent chunk of power in a less meritocratic hierarchy, and are seen as having very “powerful” or even “of a different world” status, even to students of Seirei Gakuen, who come from prestigious backgrounds.

Chapter 7 - Violence Solves Everything

"Takeshi!"

To gather the other members of the band back together with Alisa, Masachika rushed toward Takeshi, whom he spotted from the stage.

"Hey, Takeshi! Takeshi!"

"Oh, oh....."

Frowning at Takeshi's sluggish response despite calling him from close by.... Masachika also froze upon seeing the person Takeshi's gaze was fixated on.

"Shiratori....."

"....."

Nao looked like she didn't know what to do and silently averted her gaze. Masachika hesitated for a second, then called out again to Takeshi, who also stood there frozen, not knowing what to do.

"Takeshi, let's put that whole situation with Shiratori on hold for now and return to the stage."

"Yeah, but....."

"Shiratori won't run away, and you can have a proper talk later! So, for now, focus on the live performance! Show your little brother what you can do!"

At Masachika's words, Takeshi shook his shoulders for a moment before dashing off, hurriedly looking around.

"Yes, that's right! Where is he?"

"Hey, wait, Shiratori!"

Taken aback by Takeshi's sudden dash, Masachika took a few steps before turning to Nao. Then, he lowered his head abruptly.

“Sorry, I was out of line earlier!”

“Eh——”

“Sorry, we’ll talk more later!”

Leaving those hurried words behind, Masachika followed after Takeshi. Fortunately, Takeshi was wandering while looking around, so Masachika didn’t lose sight of him and quickly caught up. At the same time, Takeshi spotted his younger brother.

“Kano!

“Oh, nii-chan!”

“Are you okay!? Did you hurt yourself or something!?”

“Umm, yeah, onee-san was protecting me.....”

Saying that, what Kano indicated with his gaze was Sayaka, who was holding hands with him. Takeshi immediately tightly grasped her other hand that was free and deeply bowed his head.

“Sayaka! Seriously, thank you!”

“Uh, well, it was just a coincidence.....”

“Really, thank you.....!”

While Sayaka’s eyes flickered between white and black due to Takeshi’s heartfelt gratitude, she noticed that her hands were occupied and froze. Surprised by Sayaka, who was rarely in a state of shock, Masachika called out to Takeshi.

“Sorry to interrupt this emotional scene, but could you please return to the stage as soon as possible? You can take your brother with you.”

“Yeah, but.....”

“I’ll make sure the show goes on. So, please trust me. I’ll call Hikaru and Nonoa right away.”

At Masachika’s words, Takeshi and Sayaka looked at each other for a moment before nodding, and the three of them headed toward the

stage. Looking behind himself, Masachika pulled out his phone and wondered where the other two were.

“Hikaru…… is probably in the restroom in the school building.”

Then, while making a phone call to Hikaru, Masachika ran toward the school building.

◇

“Ugh, I still feel kind of weird…… This always happens when I’m nervous.”

After using the restroom, Hikaru walked down the hallway with a reluctant look on his face to return to the schoolyard. Then, just off to the side of the school building, a voice jumped into his ears that sounded like a man and a woman arguing about something.

Turning his gaze in that direction, he saw a scene where a group of boys surrounded a slightly flashy girl. It seemed like a typical pick-up situation, but the atmosphere was far from calm. It was unusual for four boys to surround a single girl. Moreover, all of the boys had brightly colored hair, such as gold or green, and wore sloppy clothing. Clearly, they were delinquents, a type of people not commonly seen in Seirei Gakuen or its surrounding area.

(What’s with this……? Why are those types of people here?)

Labeling them as mischievous friends of some student would be a bit far-fetched. After all, the invitations for the event had the names of the invitees written on them, so if problematic individuals were invited, the students who invited them would be held accountable. It was hard to believe that there were students who would invite such risky individuals and let them roam freely.

(But I can’t afford to think about that right now.)

It seemed that some students around also noticed the behavior of the boys, but no one made a move to help. Hikaru himself had no experience in dealing with such situations, and it was his first time

having a conversation with delinquents, but ignoring the situation was not an option from the beginning.

“Huh?”

Then, inside Hikaru’s pocket, his phone began to vibrate. However, Hikaru ignored it for the moment and approached the delinquents.

“I told you, my sister is calling me! Let me go already!”

“So why don’t you bring your sister along too~?”

“Yeah~. Let’s have fun together”

With vulgar laughter echoing around the visibly irritated girl, the boys gradually started moving towards a more secluded area. Hikaru mustered his courage and called out to them.

“Um, excuse me.”

However, the men only glanced at him and completely ignored his presence.

“Excuse me! Can I have a moment?”

“Oh?”

Deciding that there was no way out of this, Hikaru boldly grabbed one of the men by the shoulders. Then, he gulped at the vicious look in the man’s eye, and strained his stomach.

“I’m a member of the school festival committee. I would like to ask you to refrain from persistently picking up girls on campus without regard to the other person’s intention.”

He called out calmly, even bluffing. However, the other party was not a communicative group to begin with.

“Ah, yeah yeah, whatever.”

The man brushed Hikaru’s hand away roughly and grabbed the girl’s arm forcefully, seemingly losing interest in trying to resolve the situation.

“Ouch, hey!”

“Hey! Aren’t you guests too? If you cause trouble here, the person who invited you will face consequences!”

At Hikaru’s words, the men stopped moving for a moment, then all grinned at the same time.

“The person who invited us, huh?”

“I’m telling you, we’re only doing this at the request of the guy who invited us.”

“What……?”

At the moment Hikaru was taken aback, the man grinning in front of him suddenly became straight-faced ——and the next moment, a shock pierced through his abdomen.

“Huh!? Gah!”

In an instant, he lost the strength from his legs and collapsed on the spot. Immediately afterwards, a severe pain that seemed to turn his internal organs upside down came up from his abdomen to his throat, and Hikaru found himself in agony.

“Heh, haha, weakling. Don’t try to act tough, you wimp!”

“Yeah, you should train yourself more, rich boy!”

“What are you guys doing!?”

From overhead, Hikaru could hear the taunts of the men and the screamed protests of the girl, but he didn’t have time to pay attention to them. The pain was the greatest pain he had ever felt in his life, and all he could do was stare at the ground, his vision blurred with tears.

“Help, Sis! Leo!”

The girl’s voice told him that someone had come to help her……

(Oh, thank God.)

Hikaru felt a little relief in the corner of his mind.

◇

It was at the age of four that Nonoa clearly realized that she was out of step with her surroundings.

It was during lunch break at kindergarten. There was a rumor that there was a big frog in a small pond in the corner of the ground, and more than a dozen children from the same class gathered there. Then, spotting the biggest frog they had ever seen on a dead branch sticking out from the center of the pond, a few mischievous boys started throwing rocks at it.

Then one of the teachers came running in, looking panicked. Normally, she would caution the children not to approach the pond because it was dangerous, so it seemed like she intended to do the same this time. However, when she saw the boys persistently throwing stones at the frog, her expression changed.

“Stop it. Don’t you feel sorry for the frog!?”

At the teacher’s shout, the boys who had been throwing stones stopped moving. The children watching around them also looked somewhat uncomfortable, their faces downcast. Among them, only Nonoa.

She genuinely wondered, “What’s the teacher talking about?”

There was no way the teacher could know if the frog was suffering or not. Why would this teacher tell such a lie that anyone could understand with such a nonchalant face? Adults always told children that they should not tell lies. So why……

“Yes~!”

“I understand~”

Why were the other children so convinced? It was beyond strange, it was eerie. The teacher who told lies with a serious face, and the children around her who were deceived. Nonoa couldn’t help but think of them as creatures different from herself.

She understood why they shouldn’t approach the pond. It was dangerous if they fell in. She understood why she shouldn’t hit their friends. If they hit someone, that person would hit back. But she

couldn't understand why they shouldn't throw stones at a frog. Even if they threw stones at a frog, a frog wouldn't throw stones back at them. No matter how much she thought about it, she couldn't believe that humans would suffer any harm from a frog. After all, the teacher said it wasn't because it was dangerous but because it was "pitiful." In other words…

(I see, everyone is an idiot.)

She was sure that's what the teacher meant. The truth is, she didn't know why they shouldn't throw stones at the frog. She didn't know, so she tried to deceive by telling a simple lie. And the other children were so easily fooled. The teacher who thought they could deceive, and the children who were all deceived, were all idiots. The moment Nonoa realized this, the teacher became untrustworthy. Because they would tell lies.

"Do you understand, everyone?"

"""""Yes~"""""

However, Nonoa also realized that it would be troublesome if she openly expressed her thoughts. Besides, her mother had told her to "listen to what the teacher says."

"Yes."

She nodded obediently along with those around her.

Even after that, Nonoa's distrust towards her teacher continued to grow. Upon closer examination, her teacher's words were full of lies and contradictions, even within the realm of understanding for children. She must have been telling even more lies than Nonoa thought. Once she came to such a realization, she could no longer believe in anything.

"Hey, Dad, Mom, why does Sensei lie?"

One day, Nonoa was so sickened by the lies that she couldn't bear the feeling of being around others. Her parents looked at her with surprise and asked her what had happened. In response, Nonoa spoke harshly.

How the teacher never told her the truth. How the teacher always said random things and tried to make everyone follow her words forcefully.

Trying her best to convey those thoughts, her father nodded with a serious expression and gently stroked Nonoa's head.

"I see..... Nonoa is much more mature and clever than the other children."

".....Clever?"

"Yes, Nonoa is smart enough to understand when adults are lying."

Clever. That was a word she had not expected to hear. For a long time, she had thought that she was exceptionally normal. So this unexpected compliment from her father was a ray of sunshine for Nonoa.

"Lies.... So, everyone is lying after all?"

"Ummm, it's hard to say what's a lie, but——"

As her father hesitated to answer, Nonoa's mother took over the conversation.

"Listen, Nonoa. In this world, what everyone believes to be true becomes true."

"What? Even if it is a lie?"

"Yes, even if it's a lie. Even if it is a lie, if everyone thought it was true, it will become true."

".....Disgusting."

Nonoa frowned and muttered those words, causing her parents to wear slightly troubled expressions. In truth, at that moment, the two of them hadn't realized their daughter's true peculiarity. Not was it intelligence, but rather Nonoa's inherent uniqueness was her lack of guilt and empathy.

The primary reason why Nonoa felt out of step with her surroundings was because she could not feel guilty about bullying living

creatures. And it was because she could not sympathize with the awareness of those around her that it was pitiful to bully said living creatures.

Her parents thought, “Because she is intelligent, she must have seen through the true feelings and formalities of adults.” But that was a mistake. Nonoa simply couldn’t comprehend emotions and didn’t get swayed by her own feelings or the opinions of others. Therefore, she merely judged the teacher’s words as a deceptive way of hiding the truth.

But on top of this misunderstanding, Nonoa’s parents miraculously drew the correct answer at this time.

“Nonoa. Being smart is something to be proud of..... but it’s also important to fit in with others, you know? Look, if you go against everyone and make things difficult, won’t it be troublesome?”

“But if you really can’t understand what the teacher says, you can tell Mom or Dad, okay? We’ll talk to the teacher on your behalf.”

These words, spoken with genuine concern for their daughter’s well-being, struck a chord deep in Nonoa’s heart.

At this moment, her parents became the only adults in her life that she could trust. She decided to obey her parents in order to fit in and avoid trouble. That absolute rule became the one and only law that bound Nonoa and protected her.

And now, Nonoa found herself in a particular situation.

In front of the approaching man with a smirk on his face, she questioned her own law. Behind the man, Rea was being held by another man. Hikaru was crouched down, clutching his abdomen. Hikaru, who had tried to help Rea, had been beaten down. Witnessing this scene... Nonoa felt her heart pounding strongly, a sensation she hadn’t felt in a long time.

(Ah, this feels good...)

Her heart stirred. Heat surged through her body. The sense of her own will, always overlooking the world, merging with her body. The exhilaration of becoming human.

(I'd like to immerse myself in this sensation more..... but this is getting quite troublesome.)

Staring at the obstacle in front of her, Nonoa thought. What should she do now in this place? She looked back at the many rules her parents have given her up until now.

"Be nice to your brother and sister."

"Treat your friends well."

"Don't make the first move."

"Don't do anything dangerous."

"If you are in danger, run away first. If you can't do that, call for help."

"If you get involved with a strange person....."

Nonoa examined these rules in her mind and thought about what she should and not do in this situation. Then she came to a conclusion.

"Oh come on, seriously? This one is really cute too——"

"Somebody——!! Help——!!"

"!?"

Nonoa screamed with all her might right in front of the man who approached her with a vile smile on his face. The man cowered at the sudden scream. No, the true reason he froze was because he couldn't see any trace of fear in the eyes of the girl before him.

Nonoa was not afraid of anything, even though she was calling out for help at the top of her voice. After she finished screaming, her eyes were as lifeless as glass marbles, as if she were simply fulfilling her duty. This eerie sight, combined with her beautiful and perfect appearance, exuded an inhuman and unsettling aura.

"What!"

The man took a step backward in the face of the unknown entity. Looking up at his face with a blank expression, Nonoa, who had kept her word, decided to quickly eliminate the obstacle in front of her.

(For now, let's just blind him.)

In a purely rational manner, without any hesitation.

Nonoa thrusted her fingers toward the man's eyes.

"Whoa!"

The man reflexively recoiled and turned his face away, so she didn't hit her target. However, her intention was clearly conveyed.

(Wha-what just happened? What did she do to me just now!?)

The man asked himself inwardly, but he knew the answer. His common sense just didn't want to admit it.

His eyes had been targeted. It was a forbidden move, avoided even in combat sports or unrestricted brawls. He had been subjected to an eye gouge. The girl in front of him, who had attempted it, had a faint look of suspicion and disappointment, as if she had missed a shot in football or something.

"Hn!"

A terrible fear ran down his spine, and he let out a spasmodic cry without realizing it.

It was a first-time experience even for a man accustomed to using violence and being subjected to violence. It was a violent act devoid of murderous intent, anger, or pleasure, but one that suddenly assaulted him with extreme brutality. The man felt genuine fear toward the presence that had calmly carried out such an act.

"Ugh, gaaah!"

That's why, to him, it was an emergency evacuation in the form of violence. He couldn't allow this presence in front of him. He had to eliminate whatever this something was, taking the form of a beautiful girl, right away.

Driven by such madness, he swung his fist... but due to the sudden retreat of his target, it simply cut through the air. And with a wide opening created, the man's face became vulnerable.

"Gah!"

A fist punched him squarely in the face, and the man's consciousness was blacked out by the blow.

"Oh, Kuzecchi!"

"You..... at least try to dodge, will ya?"

Pulling Nonoa from behind and delivering a counter punch to the man's face, Masachika sighed with exasperation. Inadvertently, he found himself in a position where he was hugging her shoulders from behind, but Masachika showed no signs of embarrassment on his face, and Nonoa's expressionless face remained without any expression. Well, if you looked closely, there was a slight flicker of emotion in her eyes... but it was fleeting. Suddenly, Nonoa twisted her expression into a grimace, burying her face in Masachika's shoulder.

"Th-thank you..... I was scared....."

(Ugh!)

Suddenly, Nonoa acted as if she were a frail maiden frightened of violence, and Masachika tightened his facial muscles to prevent any expression of annoyance. Right here and now, Masachika was the only one who was aware of Nonoa's act . The students who were hanging around her also looked at her with satisfaction and fondness for Nonoa's behavior. And..... the crony friends of Nonoa who had heard her cries rushed to the site.

"What? Wh-who are you guys?"

"What? What about you? What were you trying to do to Nonoa?"

"I'm gonna kill you."

Two large boys appeared, sprinkling their murderous intent as much as they could, and hunted down the rest of the delinquents like the fiends they were. Masachika, still holding Nonoa in his arms, watched the scene with a look of surprise on his face.

Masachika himself didn't know much about those two. However, he knew that they fanatically worshiped Nonoa and carried out various deeds that couldn't be made public, eliminating any obstacles in her way. They were publicly known as modest fans who admired Nonoa

from afar, but in reality, they were fanatical believers who buried anyone who posed a threat to Nonoa in darkness.

(I guess I can leave that one to them..... or rather, should I be careful not to overdo it?)

Deciding that this was the case, Masachika rushed over to Hikaru, who finally raised his upper body.

“Hey, Hikaru, are you okay?”

“Umm, yeah..... I’ve calmed down now, I’m fine.”

Hikaru tried to stand up slowly while holding his stomach, but... it seemed like his legs couldn’t support him, causing him to wobble a little.

“Hold on.”

Masachika quickly grabbed Hikaru’s right arm to support him. But at the same time, there was someone..... supporting, or rather embracing, Hikaru’s left arm.

“Um, thank you so much for rescuing me.”

“Oh, uh... it’s nothing.”

Clinging to Hikaru’s left arm and pressing her body against him with sparkling eyes was the girl who had initially been harassed by the delinquents.

“Um, are you..... perhaps, Noanoa’s.....?”

“Yes! My name is Rea Miyamae, I’m her little sister! Oh, this is my younger brother, Leo.”

Saying so, Rea rudely pointed to a slightly defiant-looking boy with a swollen cheek who stood there with a sulking expression.

“Are you okay? Did they hit you?”

“No, it’s nothing serious.”

Despite Masachika’s concern, Leo simply turned away in annoyance. After a moment of looking at it as if to say, “You little brat,” Rea then quickly put on a smile and looked up at Hikaru with upturned eyes.

“What’s your name, onii-san?”

“Oh, uh… It’s Hikaru Kiyomiya.”

“Hikaru…… that’s a nice name! Can I call you Hikaru-san?”

Saying that, the girl tilted her head slightly. Despite her somewhat calculated mannerisms, she was undeniably cute, being Nonoa’s sister after all. However……

“Oh, haha…….”

To Hikaru, she was honestly the type he was extremely uncomfortable with. Hikaru forced a wry smile and gave an ambiguous answer. But Rea didn’t pay any mind to it.

“Then, I’ll call you that, okay? Thank you for helping me, Hikaru-san.”

“No, actually I couldn’t do anything about it……”

“That’s not true! If it weren’t for you, I wonder what would have happened to me……”

Rea put her hand over her mouth and lowered her gaze for a moment, her eyes filling with tears. It was a very protective gesture, but Hikaru’s reaction was indifferent.

“Well, I’m just glad nothing happened… Well, I shouldn’t say ‘nothing happened.’”

“Hmmm, you’re very kind, Hikaru-san. But I’m more worried about Hikaru’s…… stomach, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

Masachika’s gaze sharpened at the exchange and he asked.

“Did they beat you up? Or did they kick you?”

“I think they hit me.”

“Who did?”

“Well…. he’s lying over there.”

Following Hikaru's gaze, Masachika saw a man lying flat on his back.

"Heh……"

Saying this in a cold voice, Masachika yielded and headed toward the man. Hikaru, driven by a sense of urgency, gripped his wrist with a jolt.

"Hey, what are you planning to do?"

"Just wait. I'll wake him up and make him kneel before you."

"No, no, it's already enough. He's already bleeding from his nose like crazy…… and wait, isn't his front tooth broken?"

"That was self-defense, so no harm done."

"No, seriously, it's already enough!"

Stopped again with great force, Masachika looked at the fallen man, scoffed, and then turned back to Hikaru.

"Well then, just to be safe, should we go to the infirmary?"

"Huh? Oh, no, I'm fine."

"No, it's not okay. If there's any damage to your bones or organs, it could be dangerous, right?"

"That's right! I'll accompany you too, so let's go together!"

Hikaru made a face that seemed to say he'd rather be spared from that, but unfortunately, Masachika was pressed for time. If he considered that there might be more people like these delinquents, he couldn't stay here indefinitely.

"Well then, Rea? Can I leave it to you?"

"Huh, wait a sec—"

"Yes! Come on, Leo, come with us too."

"I don't really—"

Leo, wearing a sour expression, was interrupted by Nonoa's calm words.

“No, your mouth is cut, right?”

“Hey, don’t treat me like a kid, Neechan!”

“I’m not treating you like a child, I’m treating you like a little brother.”

“That’s the same damn thing!”

Nonoa tried to squeeze her brother’s cheek, but her hand was swatted away. Masachika approached and whispered softly into Nonoa’s ear.

“(After Hikaru’s treatment is done, please go back to the stage. Also, can I leave dealing with those guys to your friends?)”

“(Roger~)”

It was a curt, unenthusiastic reply. For the moment, Masachika was reassured by her words.

“(I’m counting on you.)”

Expressing his gratitude, Masachika began to move in order to fulfill his promise with Alisa.

◇

At the same time, another group of delinquents showed up at the maid café run by the first-year D and F classes.

“Kya!”

“Hey, hey, “Kya!”? Are young ladies supposed to have such refined screams?”

“P-Please stop……”

“Well, it’s just a little slap on the butt. Come on, maid, give us some service.”

The female students couldn’t say anything in response to their behavior, who seemed to mistake this place for a hostess club or

something. The absence of Sayaka and Nonoa, who were at the live performance, was significant. After all, Seirei Gakuen was a school for the affluent. Many of the students had been raised with care, far removed from any rough activities. They had never interacted with people who displayed such rudeness or rather, actively displayed it.

“Heh, well, I thought it would be boring to go to a rich school festival, but it’s more fun than I thought it would be.”

“Yeah. Real high-class ladies are different, huh? They’re nothing like our dirty girls.”

“Thank you for inviting me! Gonda-san!”

“Oh. You should be very grateful to me.”

A large man with thin eyebrows smiled broadly. This man, called Gonda by his friends, was the leader of the group.

To tell the truth, he himself had no connection to Seirei Gakuen. He was a delinquent who attended a public high school eight stations away from the school, which was famous for being rough around the edges. His only knowledge of Seirei Gakuen was that it is a school for smart and wealthy people. Why did he come to such a festival with his friends? It was because of an envelope from an unknown sender that arrived at his doorstep two weeks ago.

Inside the envelope were ten invitation tickets and a letter. The letter contained a request to “mess up the Seirei Gakuen Festival,” as well as detailed instructions on how and when he could enter the festival without getting caught by security, how he could escape after causing trouble, how he would be paid, and so on. Gonda was skeptical at first, but when he checked the locker at the station which was stated in the letter and found cash in it, he was convinced the letter was true.

“Seriously, we’re getting treated?!”

“Yeah, I had some unexpected temporary income the other day.”

“Wow, Gonda-san, you’re so generous!”

However, Gonda had no intention of blindly following the instructions and causing a major rampage. Although the letter stated that there would be no consequences for whatever they did, he wasn’t

foolish enough to take it at face value. Therefore, Gonda had no plans to do anything that would involve the police. At most, he would use this advance payment to enjoy himself as he pleased. The reward, if received, would be just a bonus… that was his mindset.

(But…… it's not as bad as I thought.)

The surrounding girls, who seemed to have a refined upbringing, cautiously observed them. They had naturally beautiful, unadorned skin and clean black hair that had never been dyed. Even though they were high school students like themselves, they were completely different creatures from the girls at their own school. Surely, the world they lived in was fundamentally different from Gonda and his friends, who didn't even have the money to attend a private school, let alone a cram school.

These young ladies, who wouldn't even be able to have an equal conversation with them under normal circumstances, were now trying to gauge their reactions. For Gonda, it was incredibly delightful. It satisfied his desire for dominance, accompanied by an overwhelming sense of omnipotence that was different from making underclassmen obey him at school.

"Hey! How long are you guys going to stay here?"

But then someone interrupted him. Unlike the other students, a female student with dyed hair and makeup was staring at them with her hands on her hips. Unbeknownst to them, she was one of Nonoa's cronies, and she was determined not to allow any further brutality in her queen's absence.

"It looks like you've been sexually harassing my girls a lot. Forget the bill, get the hell out of here!"

"Hah?"

In response to the girl's scolding, one of the delinquents raised his eyebrow and stood up. However,

"Hey."

Gonda, with a glare, made the man sit down and turned to the female student with a fake smile on his face.

“I’m sorry, I’m a bit ill-mannered. At my place, it’s not even sexual harassment to touch someone’s buttocks. I’ll give you my order, so please give me a break.”

The female student blinked as if she had just been caught off guard by this unexpectedly unsolicited offer. But she immediately wrinkled her brow and rejected the offer.

“Hey, hey, didn’t I say we’ll pay? Besides, who’s bothered by us being here? Huh?”

Saying so, Gonda looked around, but all the other customers had already left. It was obvious that the cause was Gonda and his friends, more so than anything else.

“It’s because of you that the other customers can’t get in!

“That’s a problem. Hey, we’ll compensate for that too, right?”

“Oh well. I’ll have a Coke then!”

“Uh, I’ll have a beer.”

“You idiot, that’s not on the menu.”

The students laughed foolishly. After that, Gonda dutifully avoided the female student’s demands, but..... just as the female student was about to lose her patience, the classroom door swung open.

“That’s enough!”

Entering while spouting lines like a live action hero was a cross-dressing beauty with honey coloured hair in a ringlet roll hairstyle.

“S-Sumire-senpai!”

While the female maids had relieved expressions and Gonda and the others were taken aback by her appearance, Sumire looked down at Gonda and the others with dignity and said proudly:

“We won’t resolve anything through discussion. Let us calmly resort to violence!”

“Calmly resort to violence?”

Gonda and the others were stunned by this brazen remark, which bore no resemblance to her ladylike appearance.

“Suppress them☆, desuwa!”

With these words as a cue, the five members of the Public Discipline Committee stormed into the classroom.

“W-Wait! We weren’t causing any trouble or anything!”

“T-That’s not what you said!”

“Using weapons is unfair!”

It took less than a minute for Gonda and his friends to be mercilessly overwhelmed, without any room for argument or resistance.

◇

“Kujou-senpai! We have another report of trouble from a student!”

“Where is it?”

“Well, three…… men were forcibly picking up two female students near the gym.”

“Then it’s the same thing as before. Chairman-san, let’s send security guards there.”

“Oh? Excuse me, but it seems that the issue has already been resolved. One of the visitors who happened to be present at the scene managed to restrain the troublemakers…”

“A visitor? Were they injured?”

“No, it seems not. I couldn’t get all the details, but when their ticket was checked, it turned out they might be a relative of Sarashina-senpai……”

“Oh, Chisaki-chan’s……”

Reports of troubles with unwanted guests and violent incidents kept coming in one after another. The committee members, who had not anticipated such a situation at all, were completely shaken up. The only reason they were still able to respond to the situation was because the three of them were calmly giving instructions to the others.

“Chairman-san! There was a man who interrupted the stage in the gym!”

“Calm down, there should be some teachers in the gymnasium. But more importantly, have you closed the school gates yet? And are we ready for the school-wide announcement?”

“The closure seems to be complete now! I have Inoue at the school gate explaining the situation to visitors.”

“Alright, then——”

“Excuse me!”

Then, Touya and Chisaki opened the door to the conference room. The unexpected appearance of these two people caused both surprise and relief to spread among the people in the room.

“Touya…… What happened to the Raikokai?”

“I asked the bodyguards who were escorting them to bring them outside and have them wait in the Student Council room. In this situation, there’s no need for them to be guided or anything.”

“I see……”

After hearing Touya's words, the committee Chairman showed a slightly worried expression, then nodded and issued further instructions.

"Understood. Touya, please assist here. Sarashina, you...."

"I know. We just have to crush all the troublemakers, right?"

"Don't overdo it, okay? And also, please don't involve anyone who is not involved. We are in the process of checking the surveillance cameras, and it seems that the paper material used for the invitations held by the intruders is different from the real thing, so if you see someone suspicious, you should first——"

"Roger that. But I can't guarantee that I won't overdo it. I..... will never forgive them for messing up the school festival that we worked so hard to put together."

As they watched her back, half reassuring, half worried that she might overdo it, a bespectacled member suddenly stood up.

"I'm going to the site, too."

"Kaji?"

"Kensaki-kun is also here, and I want to talk to the teachers a little about the security situation."

Upon hearing his words, the chairwoman thought, "Indeed, it might be awkward to have Touya and Kaji work together," and nodded.

"Understood."

"Chairman-san! Class 1-D has been taken care of!"

"Oh, I see. Understood."

The sudden outbreak of multiple troubling events were gradually being brought under control, thanks to the swift response of the executive committee and disciplinary committee.

◇

“Bullshit.”

Yuki muttered as she looked at the middle-aged man she had subdued in the hallway. He had been ranting and causing a scene, saying things like, “You ruined my life” and “You destroyed my company,” but it made no sense. She noticed the invitation ticket he had and spoke under her breath.

“With an invitation like this, you shouldn’t be able to enter the school.....”

The names in the inviter’s column were meant to be checked at the school gate by a member of the public morals committee. If they used the name of a fictitious student, they would have been denied entry at that point.

“Ojou-chan, where should I take this guy?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. To the disciplinary committee room..... Do you know where it is?”

“Don’t worry. I’m a graduate of this school.”

“In that case, may I ask you to handle it?”

“Yeah, all right.”

Leaving the man in the custody of a nearby adult, Yuki looked back at Ayano and shrugged her shoulders.

“It seems that in addition to the person who distributed the counterfeit invitations, there was someone who helped break in from the inside. It’s possible they are the same person, though.....”

“Is that so?”

“.....Put your weapons away for now. It’s not something you want people to see too much of.”

“Oh, excuse me.....”

Upon Yuki’s words, Ayano hid the sharp object she used to subdue the man in her sleeve. Then, unexpectedly, she muttered something to herself.

“……The student council room.”

“Hm?”

“If it’s Masachika-sama, I believe he would head to the Student Council room.”

At Ayano’s words, Yuki raised her eyebrows and thought for a few seconds……

“……I see. The target is the Raikokai, huh?”

Yuki said to herself and headed for the student council room with Ayano.

◇

In the student council chambers, a school-wide disturbance took place as the members of the Raikokai were visiting. It was a scandalous incident for which, if one were a working professional, the issue of responsibility for the supervisory staff would be unavoidable. However, the members of the Raikokai present in that room showed no signs of discomfort…. or so it seemed.

“Now…… I wonder how they intend to settle the matter?”

“Rather than that, I wonder who caused this turmoil? I’m assuming they are trying to target the current student council…. or perhaps maybe targeting the former president and vice-president?”

No, on the contrary, they were even rather enjoying this commotion. Even the eyes looking down at the schoolyard where the commotion was taking place were more curious than concerned. Their demeanor was truly that of spectators from a higher vantage point.

Of course, if the commotion really turned into a disturbance that resulted in a string of injuries, they would mobilize their bodyguards here to bring the situation under control. However, at this stage, the members of the Raikokai were more interested in observing the response from the coordinating members of the student body. For them,

it was not unusual for this level of commotion to occur during an election campaign.

“With the former student council president serving as the executive committee chair and the current student council overseeing the school festival itself, it was customary for those who aimed to overthrow the current student council to target this event. That was the norm back then during our time.”

“The only way to qualify for the Raikokai was to survive and succeed in coordinating the school festival..... But I suppose times have changed.....”

“Even so, it’s still pathetic..... Excuse me. I mean no disrespect to Suou-san’s granddaughter.”

“It doesn’t matter. The fact remains that my granddaughter failed to prevent this situation.”

Back when they were students, corporal punishment by teachers was commonplace in schools across the country. Seirei Gakuen served as a distinguished social gathering place for its students, and the election campaigns were legitimate factional disputes where the students represented their respective families.

The Raikokai, which was originally just a group of influential alumni, introduced the election system about 70 years ago in order to centralize power and make it more elite. Since then, the students of the school have been vying for just two seats, using power, financial resources, and sometimes even violence. And in the election campaign, where everything was at stake, it was not unusual to see people injured or even expelled from school.

But that was why the positions of student body President and Vice President were so special. Winning such factional battles and taking such positions was synonymous with becoming the rulers of the generation. And the organization where such rulers gathered was today’s Raikokai. They have the power to move Japan without exaggeration. With their connections, there was nothing they couldn’t do in Japan. That is why, from their point of view..... the current generation’s election campaign seemed utterly feeble.

The advancement of social media and the strengthening of compliance were pressing forces of the era, causing the previously fierce election battles to fade away. While the ruthless screening system, such as debates and greetings by student council members, remained unchanged, such reality had transformed into a popularity contest among the students. They didn't respect the current Student Council President and Vice-President, who were chosen in such an election campaign. Moreover, deep down, they didn't even acknowledge them as fellow members of the Raikokai.

"But it seems that there is a candidate pair that is a little interesting this year, isn't there? I heard that if they are to be elected, they plan to incorporate the opposing candidate into the student council to work alongside them."

To dispel the slightly awkward atmosphere, one of the men raised his voice and Gensei's eyebrows twitched. The other man, however, did not seem to notice and responded in a curious manner.

"Oh, including the opposing candidate as well? Hmm, quite intriguing.... It seems that candidate pairing understands the essence of an election campaign."

What they mean by the essence of an election campaign was networking. To make connections that would be useful to them in the future, form factions, and when they eventually achieve electoral victory, give their faction members positions on the board of directors. In this way, they control the students of the school and the people of their generation. That was the election campaign for them.

"That would give me a little hope for next term's election campaign..... It seems we have some other students with a bone to pick who can cause such a ruckus."

"Hmmm, so far, it looks like things are going exactly as that someone wants them to..... Well, let's see what happens now, shall we?"

But there was one easy way to get away with it.

Knowing this, they waited. They awaited the moment the doors of the student council room would open once again.

◇

“Oh.....”

“Ara.”

Masachika stopped for a moment when he saw Yuki and Ayano, who appeared from just the opposite side of the hallway in front of the student council chambers. But as they approached, Masachika also walked silently. In front of the student council room, the opposing candidates faced off.

“.....”

The two parties stood on either side of the door to the student council chambers, and at about the same time, Masachika and Yuki looked at each other silently for a few seconds before turning their attention to the two men who appeared to be the Raikokai’s bodyguards.

“Excuse me, I am Masachika Kuze, one of the Student Council’s General Affairs officers. I have been instructed by President Kensaki to come here to check on the Raikokai.”

“Likewise, I’m Yuki Suou, Student Council Public Relations.

“I am Ayano Kimishima, Student Council General Affairs.”

All three of them introduced themselves and showed their student ID cards.

“Has anyone else come here before us? While we appreciate the presence of the bodyguards ensuring safety, it is crucial that the whereabouts of the Raikokai members are not known to suspicious individuals.”

In response to Masachika’s question, the two bodyguards looked at each other for a moment before answering shortly.

“No, no one else had arrived before.”

“I see..... Thank you.”

Masachika and Yuki were internally relieved to hear these words. They had made it in time.

“Now what do we do? Masachika-kun.”

“……”

A short distance away from the student council room, Yuki asked Masachika. She looked at her brother’s eyes and let out a small wry smile.

“In that case, let’s keep an eye on each person who arrives. Regardless of who they are, let’s hold no grudges.”

“Ah.”

After a small nod, Masachika spun around on his heel. Feeling the presence of Ayano at his back, Masachika turned the corner of the corridor and leaned his back against the wall.

After a few minutes of waiting, a figure appeared at the other end of the corridor. Masachika stood in the middle of the corridor and greeted the person with a faint smile on his face.

“Yo, Kiryuin. What brings you here to such a place?”

“Ah Kuze. I could ask you the same thing, what are you doing here?”

In response to Masachika’s unfriendly smile, Yusho answered with a faint smirk of his own.

◇

“……it you, was it?”

On the other hand, as Yuki headed in the opposite direction from Masachika, another male student appeared before her.

Looking up at Yuki, who was standing in front of the staircase, the student narrowed his eyes behind his glasses. Meeting his gaze, Yuki spoke calmly.

“That’s a shame, President-san.”

The boy chuckled a little at this call.

“I’m not the President anymore…… Suou-san.

“That’s right…… Kaji, Chairman of the Disciplinary Committee.”

The 67th and 68th student body Presidents of Seirei Gakuen Junior High School faced each other across the stairs.

Chapter 8 - If It Doesn't Yield, Then There's No Choice But To Break It

Taiki Kaji. The son of the president of a major home appliance manufacturer who just so happened to have served as the student council president at the Seirei Gakuen junior high school three years ago. Sayaka, Nonoa, Yusho, Sumire, Yuki and Masachika, who were once all close friends, had all looked up to him as the President of the Student Council that they had all run together as a team. If he had not been defeated by Touya in the election campaign, she would still be calling him "President" by now.

"You intentionally created a weakness in security and let the intruders in, didn't you? Kaji-senpai."

In response to Yuki's question, Taiki silently lowered his gaze. That was enough for Yuki.

"Why are you doing this?"

"……Why? I'm sure Suou-san has an idea why, don't you?"

Yuki answered Taiki's cross-examination without changing her expression.

"It's about Kirika-senpai, isn't it?"

"……Yes, that's right…… to get her, Kirika, back, I have to…… do whatever it takes to join the Raikokai!"

Letting his raging emotions get the better of him, Taiki shouted in a slightly out of tune voice.

Kirika Asama was Taiki's partner in the campaign. However, their relationship went beyond that—they were engaged, which was rare in this day and age. Although their engagement was arranged by their parents for business purposes, they did not have a bad relationship, especially for Taiki, who was madly in love with Kirika. However, when Taiki lost to Touya in the election campaign, losing his chance to join

the Raikokai, their engagement was dissolved by the Asama family's proposal.

"They said they didn't want a son-in-law who lost to a commoner..... I was abandoned! If things continue like this, Kirika will be married off to another influential family..... To prevent that, I need to somehow get the Raikokai's attention now!"

His voice lacked restraint and displayed clearly his unstable emotional state. His pupils contracted behind glasses. He was a far cry from the former Taiki that Yuki knew.

"That's right..... It was weird from the beginning. To want to be the student council just for the girl I loved? It was ridiculous how much I..... care about Kirika, I know. But everyone is..... wrong by voting for such a commoner. They're absolutely wrong..... definitely wrong, I'm the one who deserved it the most....."

Muttering while biting his nails, Taiki was met with a slightly pitiful look from Yuki before she quietly asked.

"Who influenced you and what did they say to you?"

At Yuki's question, Taiki stopped moving and slowly raised his gaze. Looking straight back into his eyes, Yuki continued earnestly.

"The Kaji-senpai I knew was not one to hold such arrogant and self-centered thoughts. Let me ask you again. Who or what instigated you with this idea?"

Taiki was met with the face of the gaze of a junior who tried to believe in their respected Senpai..... However, Taiki responded with a dark smile and a snort.

"What do you know about me?"

Taiki shut Yuki down, telling her not to talk like a know-it-all. In response, Yuki quickly narrowed her eyes and said,

"Annoying[1]."

".....Eh?"

Taiki, taken aback by the offensive remark that came from the mouth of the lady of the Suou family, who was known for her elegance

and the epitome of being a prestigious daughter, opened his mouth wide in astonishment, believing it to be a misunderstanding. But of course, it was not a misunderstanding.

“What do you mean by, ‘What do you know about me?’? Of course I don’t know anything! I don’t hold any interest in you to that extent! You lost, fair and square, due to your own lack of ability, and yet you fell into darkness just because your engagement was annulled? Apologize to all the young ladies out there who were falsely accused, had their engagements broken, and were expelled from the country!”

“!?”

Taiki, experiencing the greatest sense of panic in the past few years, struggled to process Yuki’s insults and incomprehensible demand for an apology after she shed her ojou-sama facade. However, Yuki paid no attention to such matters and continued at full throttle.

“Listen up! A man can only fall into darkness if he has already established a good relationship with the heroine! It is only when a heroine who can accompany him in that darkness exists, that falling into darkness becomes an event that can advance a romantic relationship! Falling into darkness while being single is utterly worthless and self-indulgent in the realm of romance, so please refrain from it. Besides, if you continue like this, all I see in your future is becoming a stalker man obsessed with your ex-fiancé, you know?”

“Wha-What, I-I’m not becoming a stalker, you know!?”

“Then face it head-on! A situation where being forcibly separated by her parents could turn into an amazing scenario depending on your choices! That’s where true manliness is tested! Don’t channel your passion in the wrong direction!!”

With a desperate cry from Yuki, Taiki’s face turned pale. Completely pale, and then…… when he returned to normal, all signs of his emotional instability had completely disappeared. In a state of complete dejection, he weakly questioned Yuki.

“What should I do….?”

In response to that question, Yuki pointed straight behind Taiki.

“First! Go to Kirika-senpai and apologize. Confess everything you did and then say, ‘I didn’t want to give up on you even if it meant doing something like this.’ Look, I already called Kirika-senpai and had her wait behind the school building for you.”

Saying that, Yuki flicked her thumb sideways, and Ayano, who had actually been there all along, stepped forward and held up Yuki’s smartphone. Taiki, who hadn’t noticed her presence, was startled as she suddenly appeared. Then he smiled faintly, as if a burden had been lifted.

“Haha, I suppose you’re right..... I should have talked things out more properly, shouldn’t I?”

Muttering to himself, Taiki lowered his head with the calm expression that Yuki was familiar with.

“Thank you, Suou-san. I’ll talk to Kirika again.”

“Yeah. Oh by the way, I can’t help but ask, but is Yusho Kiryuin the guy behind all this?”

“Yeah, that’s right.... His aim was to create chaos at the school festival and undermine the authority of the current Student Council. He also intended to have Sumire-san solve the trouble to elevate her own credibility. It seems like he was drawing in troublemakers, people who held grudges against the student council or even the school itself, even magazine reporters and annoying social media influencers..... But I didn’t know the details. In the end, I suppose I was just one of his pawns...”

“I see, so I guess this incident is over now. The ‘mastermind wannabe prince’ will be taken care of by Masachika-kun, right?”

With Yuki casually dissing Yusho, Taiki chuckled.

“You trust Kuze-kun, don’t you.”

“Of course, Masachika-kun is the strongest.”

Yuki placed a hand on her waist and puffed out her chest. Seeing that, Taiki’s wry smile deepened, and he shook his head self-deprecatingly.

“Oh, is that so… Hahaha, I had thought that maybe you two had some falling out…… I really just pretended to know everything when I actually knew nothing.”

Muttering like that, Taiki glanced up at Yuki for a moment, then walked down the stairs. As his footsteps receded and eventually became inaudible, Yuki suddenly relaxed her shoulders.

“Phew~ Dealing with a Senpai who complicated his first love is such a pain. Well, if I consider the fact that Kaji-senpai probably owes me a favor now, it’s not too bad, I guess.”

“Yes, it seems that if we can get the assistance of Kaji-senpai, the former junior high school Student Council president and current Disciplinary Committee Chairman, it would work in our favor in the election. Nevertheless, your persuasive skills were truly impressive. I was sincerely impressed.”

“Oh well, it was more like defeating his arguments…… Well, thanks to his inherently good nature, it worked out.”

While waving her hand to Ayano, who was looking at her, Yuki turned her gaze in the direction her brother had gone.

“Things won’t be so easy for him over there……”

◇

On the other side, Masachika and Yusho confronted each other with knives behind their smiles.

“There are VIPs ahead from here. Other than the President and the Vice President, other members of the student body are prohibited from going further from here, you know?”

“That includes you, right? Just because you’re a student council member doesn’t mean you’re an exception.”

“Yeah, you’re right. So, how about you take a detour with me and go back?”

While exchanging superficial smiles and shallow words, Masachika and Yusho probed each other's true intentions. They were aware of each other's ulterior motives, but it had come to a point where they still engaged in this formal exchange. However……

"Unfortunately, that won't be possible."

When Yusho firmly refused, Masachika also stopped pretending to smile. With a serious expression, he raised his chin and looked at Yusho with a mocking gaze.

"Oh, so you're not even trying to hide it anymore."

"What are you talking about?"

"No matter how freely you act, do you really think the higher-ups will simply 'forgive' you? How naive. Even if Raikokai forgives this incident, do you think the school would comply?"

Yusho didn't let himself be provoked and maintained his smile.

"I don't know what you're talking about…… but you're the naive one. Do you think this school is in the position to defy the Raikokai's intentions?"

"This incident raises the interests of the police. If the school doesn't address it properly, the public won't forgive us."

"Is that so? This school has a kind of extraterritoriality…… Besides, even if it becomes an issue, the responsibility falls on the current sitting Student Council, who organized the festival, and the former President and Vice President, right?"

"Yeah, and the perpetrator behind the commotion, too."

"That's right. It would be great if they were found, wouldn't it? The perpetrator."

Masachika inwardly clicked his tongue at Yusho's smug smile. He was probably cautious about being recorded and not giving any incriminating evidence. Judging by his composure, he most likely hadn't left any evidence that would lead back to himself. In fact, Masachika hadn't been able to find any evidence that Yusho was the one behind this whole ordeal.

(Well, even if evidence were to surface…… the Raikokai would be able to suppress it. In reality, as long as there was a motive to do whatever it takes to win the election, they'd seem to forgive anything and everything.)

And at that moment, Masachika remembered the stories he had heard from his grandfather, Gensei, about election battles during his childhood. Most likely, the Raikokai would forgive such actions. Yusho must have been aware of that, which was why he was trying to obtain forgiveness directly.

"Why would you do something like this…… No, that's a foolish question. You wouldn't stand a chance if a regular popularity contest were held as usual; and as such, you've resorted to undermining the authority of the current student council through twisted means…… That's just like you, isn't it?"

"I don't understand what you're talking about."

Yusho, still trying to maintain a composed expression, expressed a slightly different type of smile.

"But if I may speak in general terms…… Isn't it the nature of elections to use all available means, even if they're twisted or underhanded? Do you think all power struggles in the world are conducted peacefully and cleanly?"

With an ambitious and mocking smile, Yusho taunted.

"Money, power, violence…… If adults used them, then I should be able to use everything I can to win. Those who have the strength, determination, and resolve to do so are worthy of Raikokai. Immature individuals who can't bring themselves to do so aren't worthy of being accepted by them."

"Quite an impressive opinion. Please continue to present it when we reach the student council room to the higher-ups of Raikokai,"

"Right. So…… Can you let me pass?"

Yusho asked while once again displaying a confident smile. He took something out of the inner pocket of his uniform. It was something

that Masachika had only seen on television, and it made him raise an eyebrow.

“Hey, hey, bringing a stun gun to school? ……Do heirs of big corporations really have to be that concerned about self-defense?”

“I don’t usually carry it around. But today, since there were going to be a lot of outsiders, it’s just a precaution. After all, it turned out like this, didn’t it?”

“Yeah no kidding. What a coincidence.”

Masachika shrugged his shoulders calmly as he spoke, and Yusho narrowed his eyes sharply. He then revealed a flat voice, devoid of a smile, as he extended the stun gun in front of him.

“Will you let me pass? Like I said before, I have no hesitation in using violence when necessary.”

“That’s good. I didn’t intend to hesitate either.”

After stating this nonchalantly, Masachika’s demeanor changed. He pierced Yusho’s eyes with a sharp gaze, but his tone remained calm as he slowly asked,

“The school festival that everyone in the Student Council worked so hard to organize…… What about them?”

All those days when everyone else all came together and gave it their all, even screaming that we were short-staffed…

“How about Takeshi, not to mention Hikaru who tried to make the live performance a success despite getting beaten up……?”

Two best friends who managed to pick up their instruments to continue and face forward even after their band’s collapse.

“Alya…. and the courage she forced herself to have by facing her own weaknesses……”

Alisa, who had revealed her weakness only to Masachika behind the stage, despite being the type who never wanted to show her vulnerability.

“And you, who tried to ruin everything..... Do you think I’ll let you off so easily?”

As the tension rapidly escalated between the two, Yusho swallowed his saliva in response to Masachika’s quiet yet simmering anger. He felt his hand holding the stun gun moisten with sweat and took a step back, adopting a defensive stance.

Standing about five meters apart, facing each other, the air crackled with an increasing sense of tension. And then, out of nowhere, came an unexpected and utterly absurd question that epitomized Masachika’s composed yet boiling fury.

“By the way, which do you prefer, moderately big breasts or completely massive ones?”

“Hah....?”

It was a question so out of place and nonsensical that Yusho momentarily froze in bewilderment. And in that split second of his lapse in concentration, Masachika seized the opportunity and made his move.

Masachika had practiced karate in his early years, learned kendo in junior high school, and took up judo in high school. He had a black belt in karate and displayed considerable proficiency in both kendo and judo, reaching the level of a third-degree black belt.

However, in this instance, Masachika employed a technique known as “Everyone’s Beloved Shukuchi[2]” His mentor was from the realm of two-dimensional characters, and his textbook was manga.

“!?”

Yusho finally noticed Masachika’s approach when his right wrist was grabbed. But in the next moment, a sharp pain shot through his wrist, and at the same time, his collar was grabbed, followed by a quick sweep of his legs.

His vision spun violently, and the impact from his fall reverberated through his back. His breath stopped, and for a moment, he thought his vision had blacked out. In an instant, he had been flipped over and pinned face-down, with his right arm twisted up behind his back.

“Guuh…. Ahh!”

With his left shoulder pressed down by a knee and his right arm twisted, he couldn’t get up at all. Struggling to twist his neck, Yusho glared up at Masachika, who calmly spoke while taking the stun gun from his hand.

“Using money, power, and violence…… going all out to win, right? So? Violence means this, doesn’t it? What do you plan to do from here?”

As he met Yusho’s eyes with a cold gaze, who furrowed his eyebrows in pain, Masachika smiled defiantly.

“What about you? What do you plan to do from here? Do you think you can just injure me and get away with it? Besides, what if someone sees this situation?”

“Why don’t I give it a try then? I think it would be quicker for me to break you than for someone to discover us. Didn’t I tell you? I won’t hesitate to use violence.”

Saying so, Masachika calmly grabbed Yusho’s index finger of his right hand and exerted pressure in the opposite direction of the joint.

“Ahh!”

Without even flinching at the small groan from Yusho, Masachika spoke without emotion.

“I’ll break each finger one by one until you admit to everything you did. When I’m done with your right hand, I won’t hesitate to do the same to the left one. You won’t be able to play the piano properly anymore. Oh, don’t worry, once you admit it, I’ll take you to Raikokai. You’ll be brought there as a miserable loser who resorted to dirty tricks.”

As he applied pressure to Yusho’s index finger, Masachika’s words made the last trace of composure disappear from Yusho’s face.

“S-Stop it! Do you really think you’ll get away with this without consequences!?”

“I wonder? You said people should be able to do anything they can to win the election, didn’t you? Well, even if I’m not let off the hook, I really don’t mind.”

“W-What?”

Peering into Yusho’s questioning eyes, Masachika wore a cynical smile.

“If you and I get expelled together, all that’s left is to pair Yuki and Alya together, and they’ll easily win. Alya would become the Student Council President and she’ll be happy. Yuki can join the Raikokai and she’ll also be happy. I can make Alya the Student Council President and Yuki won’t miss out either, so it’s a win-win. Ah, what an amazing happy ending.”

“Wha…! You, don’t tell me, you planned it from the beginning—”

In response to Yusho’s wide-eyed astonishment, Masachika answered with a silent smile, then firmly pressed his left leg against Yusho’s back, compressing his lungs as if to silence his loud voice.

“So, unlike you, I have nothing to lose. Well then, if you want to admit it, admit it sooner, alright~?”

“S-Stop it! Stop!”

Ignoring Yusho’s desperate voice and his squirming legs, Masachika exerted force in his hand—

“Well… settling it with violence would be an option, but unlike you, I try to abide by the rules as much as possible…… So I’ll give you the privilege of choice.”

“W-What…?”

Masachika looked down at Yusho, who was breathing heavily, and spoke.

“Choose. Either you get your fingers broken right now, or we settle it through a match in accordance with the rules as candidates of the same position.”

“A match….?”

“If I win, you will confess in front of all the students about what you did in this incident. On the other hand, if you win, I won’t pursue any suspicions against you.”

Upon hearing Masachika's one-sided condition, Yusho sarcastically curled the corner of his mouth.

"What's with that unfair deal? Our stakes aren't balanced—"

"I see, then the conversation ends here."

"S-Stop it! H-How..... in the first place! Even if we have a debate, how can I ensure that your end of a verbal deal will be honored!?"

"Well, that's easy. Just have Sumire-senpai be a witness."

"That..... Hah."

Yusho visibly became flustered at Masachika's words. Seeing his reaction, Masachika was convinced that Sumire was completely unaware of Yusho's scheme. At the same time, he recognized it as Yusho's weakness and swiftly pressed on.

"Don't worry. Until this is settled, I won't disclose the reason for our debate to Sumire-senpai. In other words, if you want to keep what you did a secret from Sumire-senpai, you have no choice but to defeat me..... Well, with conditions like these, I'll make sure the match favors you in some way."

"What do you mean?"

Yusho furrowed his brow, and Masachika leaned in close, sneering as he whispered.

"I'm saying we'll compete in what you're best at—playing the piano. How about a showdown, Second Place-chan?"

In that instant, Yusho's eyes widened, and his teeth were bared through his distorted lips.

"I knew it..... Suou.....!"

The fiercely competitive gaze directed at him was something Masachika remembered well. It reminded him of the same look a certain boy used to give him during competitions and recitals. Masachika arrogantly sneered, recalling that boy from the past whom he never paid much attention to until Nonoa had pointed it out.

“Oh, so you were that boy back then, huh? Sorry, but I didn’t care about you at all back then until Nonoa mentioned it.”

“You……!”

“Well, what will you do? Let me tell you, I haven’t touched a piano in over five years. It’s a match that’s extremely advantageous for you. Still, I don’t have the slightest intention of losing to you, Second Place-chan.”

Despite Masachika’s blatant provocation, Yusho couldn’t even pretend to remain calm and raised his voice in agitation.

“Don’t underestimate me…… I’ll do it! This time, I’ll defeat you… for sure!”

◇

“So you didn’t come back at all, Masachika.”

In the backstage of the schoolyard stage, Takeshi looked up towards the school building with a slightly worried expression.

It had been about forty minutes since the firecracker incident. Thanks to Alisa’s call and the efforts of the staff, the schoolyard had regained its composure, and the stage performances had resumed. At the same time, through the school-wide announcement, it was relayed that all suspicious intruders had been apprehended and the closing time would be delayed by thirty minutes, relieving any lingering concerns…… or so it should have been, but for some reason, Masachika was nowhere to be seen.

“Well, even if all the intruders have been caught, there might still be clean-up work to do…… Maybe he’s still busy?”

In response to Hikaru’s speculation, Alisa’s expression darkened slightly. As instructed by Masachika, she had made efforts to calm down the audience. She also assisted with the aftermath of the firecracker incident. But if she thought about it, that was all she did.

As a student council member and Masachika's partner, shouldn't there be more she could do? Was it really okay for her to just stay here? Alisa was tormented by a mixture of impatience and frustration, as Sayaka pushed up her glasses and spoke,

"You seem restless. As a leader, you should try to remain calm."

"Yeah, that's right. Alisa, try to calm down a bit."

"……On the other hand, you're too calm, Nonoa."

Sayaka retorted as Nonoa, who was taking selfies in her performance outfit, and both of them returned to their usual banter. Takeshi and Hikaru also relaxed their expressions.

"Yeah, there's no use worrying. Besides, it feels like a waste of time to worry about Masachika! Given his nature!"

"Haha, that's right…… Alisa, let's trust Masachika, okay? What we should do is give the best performance we can. That'll be proof that we didn't yield to suspicious intruders. We are… Fortitude, after all."

Upon hearing Hikaru's words, Alisa recalled Masachika's words in her mind.

「I'll make sure the show goes on. So, please trust me.」

Masachika had made that promise. So, Alisa knew what she had to do…… It was only natural.

After closing her eyes for a moment and opening them again, Alisa made eye contact with each member of the band. Her determined gaze, free of hesitation, was returned by each of the four.

"Thank you, everyone."

At the moment Alisa spoke those words, her phone in her pocket vibrated. Prompted by a premonition, she quickly checked the screen and found a short message from Masachika.

「Do your best.」

Just that one phrase. Yet, it made Alisa's heart burn with passion.

"(Thank you, too.)"

Whispering those words, Alisa raised her phone to her mouth and flashed a confident smile.

“Well then, let’s make our first live performance the best one ever! Eeiii!”

“Oh, Ohh~ ！”

“Ohh~?”

“…Oh~”

“Oh—!”

“Synchronize, you guys!”

As Alisa retorted and the four of them laughed, she couldn’t help but get caught up in the moment and laugh along too. Finally, their turn had come.

“And now, ‘Fortitude,’ you’re up next! Please give it your all!”

In response to the staff’s voice, they nodded to each other once again. The five of them leaped onto the stage.

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[1]: The phrase “うぜぇ” was used by Yuki here. It’s a rough slang for the word “annoying” and is something a “refined, prestigious lady” like Yuki shouldn’t typically say.

[2]: “Shukuchi” (縮地) is a phrase/term for various rapid techniques or movements, and can literally be read as “shrinking the earth”, which refers to how the technique is known for quickly reducing the distance between two points (in this context, Masachika himself and Yusho). It’s mainly used in manga and other popular culture (you might have seen it in action anime where one character immediately teleports/moves behind another character).

Chapter 9 - I'll Keep My Word

(I wonder if things are getting excited over there..... by now.)

At the backstage of the auditorium, Masachika indulged in thoughts of Alisa and the others performing on the stage in the schoolyard.

"This is ridiculous..... Can't you hold it back with these requests, Kuze?"

"Indeed. I have a performance after this, you know? Thanks to those troublemakers, I didn't have rehearsal time....."

"I'm sorry, both of you."

Masachika, approached by the fatigued stage manager and the disgruntled Sumire, bowed his head sincerely. He was aware that he made a quite unreasonable request, so apologizing was the only appropriate response.

Originally, the stage performances planned for the schoolyard and the gymnasium were temporarily suspended due to the incident. Fortunately, there were no disturbances in the auditorium, so they reinforced the security through increasing the number of faculty and security guards present, and continued according to the schedule. However, after the announcement of a thirty-minute extension to the closing time of the school festival, there was an excess of thirty minutes for the auditorium's stage performance. That's when Masachika managed to squeeze in his match with Yusho.

Ideally, it would have been an easier adjustment if they slotted in the time of the match in the last thirty minutes. However, that time was reserved for the girls' kendo club performance in the gymnasium, so they had no choice but to find an alternative. As a result, the schedule adjustment became quite unreasonable. Nevertheless, they were able to make it work, perhaps because Masachika, as one of the organizers of the auditorium's stage performance, had built a relationship of trust with the other staff members.

“Well, if our Yusho-san is involved, there’s nothing we can do…… But what do you mean by a piano competition? Although there have been non-debate showdowns in previous events, having a showdown between the candidates for Student Council President and an opposing Vice President, and not with their respective pairs…… that’s unheard of.”

Sumire raised an eyebrow as she looked at Yusho, who stood in the back with a disgruntled expression. She took a few steps closer, placing her right hand on the imitation sword at her waist. Even so, Yusho continued to avert his gaze, prompting Sumire to click her tongue.

“Yusho-san…… Since when did you start ignoring me like this?”

“……I’m just focused. Leave me alone, Sumire-neesan.”

Sumire frowned at Yusho’s curt attitude…. then she sighed lightly and turned to Masachika, asking,

“So, what about it? In any case, since it’s a showdown, there should be something at stake. What are you guys betting on?”

For example, a debate is a battle of arguments to assert one’s own opinions. Regardless of the specific content of the confrontation, it was a fundamental premise that the winner could make some demands. However, in this case, Masachika couldn’t answer that question.

“I’m sorry, Sumire-senpai. I can’t tell you what the stakes are until there’s a resolution has been reached”

“Oh? ……But then, how will the bet be carried out? For example, in a debate, it’s customary for both parties to publicly state their demands before the match and have the entire audience serve as witnesses, isn’t it?”

“We won’t make the stakes public this time. Here, both Kiryuin and I have written down the demands in case we win. We’ll have you open the envelope of the winner, Sumire-senpai, and you’ll be the witness for these demands.”

Although Yusho's envelope would be empty if he were to win. Sumire raised her eyebrows as she received the two envelopes Masachika handed her.

"……Well, fine. So, am I the host as well?"

"No, even though it's in the form of an exhibition match, it's still technically treated like a debate…… So, I've asked a student council member for that."

Just as Masachika said that, the door at the back of the stage, leading to the outside, opened.

"Excuse me~"

Entering while speaking softly, was Maria, the moderator for the debate whom Masachika had called.

"Sorry for the short notice, Masha-san."

"Nah~, it's totally fine. Things have calmed down quite a bit, so it's okay, right~?"

As soon as she saw Masachika, Maria shook her head from side to side with a loose smile. Masachika couldn't help but return a wry smile in response to her smile that easily took away his tension.

"Well, since you say so…… We're short on time, so let me start explaining right away, okay?"

"Sure thing~"

Maria noded, and as Masachika was about to explain to her…… Sumire, who had been covering her face, suddenly raised her head and spoke.

"That's unfair! I want to stand out too, since I've come this far!"

"……Huh?"

In response to her straightforward request that felt refreshingly honest, Masachika turned his head with his cheek twitching. And then, looking at the dissatisfied face Sumire made, he felt somewhat deflated.

"……Alright then, then can I leave it to the both of you?"

“Yes, of course!”

“Sure thing~!”

With Sumire proudly puffing her chest and Maria responding with a gentle smile, Masachika couldn’t help but deepen his wry smile as their enthusiasm waned in different directions. He then proceeded to explain.

◇

“Ayano-san, are you sure you don’t need to be by Yuki-san’s side? There seems to have been some trouble……”

Speaking in a low voice to Ayano, who was sitting in the neighboring seat, was Yumi Suou, the mother of Masachika and Yuki. Yumi, who had planned to watch only her daughter’s performance to then only head home after, was somehow led to the auditorium by Ayano, who had come to pick her up at the school gate, and was left feeling perplexed.

“The problem has been resolved, madam. There was a slight issue, but thanks to the efforts of the student council, it has been mostly resolved. However, Yuki-sama still needs a little more assistance, so if you could wait here for a while…”

“Well…… but why the auditorium? If there’s time, then…..”

Yumi’s words trailed off as she gazed around with uncertainty. Ayano understood what Yumi was about to say. But because she understood…… no, precisely because she understood, Ayano spoke up.

“I have made the decision to bring you here, madam.”

“Huh? What do you mean…?”

Just as Yumi voiced her question, the wind ensemble’s performance had ended, and Yumi and Ayano applauded. Then, as the students with their instruments exited the stage, two beautiful female students appeared.

“Huh? Kujou-senpai and Kiryuuin-senpai?”

“Why are the Student Council Secretary and Vice-Disciplinary committee chair here?”

“Wait, wasn’t the next performance supposed to be a reading play by the literature club?”

Yumi didn’t understand, but the surrounding students raised voices of surprise and confusion at the appearance of the two. Some worriedly wondered if something had happened, some tried to leave their seats but then sat back down, and others sensed something and started contacting their friends on their smartphones. Under the mixed gaze of anxiety and anticipation from the audience, Maria spoke up.

“To all of you here in the venue, are you enjoying the performances? First, let me start with introductions. I am Maria Kujou, the Student Council Secretary. On behalf of the student festival organizing committee, I would like to apologize for the inconvenience and concern we have caused you. And as a member of the Student Council as well, I would like to take this opportunity to offer my apologies on their behalf. I sincerely apologize.”

Without betraying her usual fluffy atmosphere, Maria bowed her head with a sincere attitude. And as not to let the atmosphere in the venue become too dark, she lifted her head before it got too gloomy and continued in a slightly brighter tone.

“Therefore, as part of our apology, we would like to hold a surprise event here, even though it’s sudden.”

When Maria shifted her gaze to the side, Sumire stepped forward with a microphone in hand.

“I am Sumire Kiryuin, Vice-Disciplinary Committee chair, and I will be the host for this surprise event. What will take place here is a tradition of our Seirei Gakuen, a direct confrontation between candidates in the election, staking their pride.”

At that moment, the voices of the students who had already guessed what was happening began to stir. Amidst the spread of surprise and anticipation, Sumire laughed powerfully and made her announcement.

“We will hold a special format debate here!”

The murmurs exploded into cheers. Active students and alumni expressed their surprise and joy at the unexpected surprise, while those who were not familiar with the situation around them became excited and started to question their friends on their phones. Gradually, the excitement settled, and the focus shifted to the questions of “Who will be competing and on what topic?” and “What does the special format entail?” The audience was now filled with curiosity.

To answer that, Maria provided an explanation.

“Since we have guests from outside this time, we will not have a debate but a different format for the confrontation. The two competing are these two!”

As Maria gestured towards the side of the stage, two male students appeared on the stage.

“Student Council’s General Affairs officer, Masachika Kuze-kun.”

“And the President of the Piano club, Yusho Kiryuin.”

With the introductions from Maria and Sumire, the venue was once again enveloped in excitement.

“Kyaaah! It’s the prince!”

“Yusho-sama!”

“Huh, Kiryuin!? Is he running for something!?”

“Kiryuin here!? Seriously!?”

“I see, so that’s what Kiryuin-senpai meant…”

Most of the voices could be heard directed towards Yusho.

“Kuze…… that guy who helped defeat Taniyama in the debate last semester?”

“The Vice President candidate who works in the shadows…. Huh, what about Princess Alya?”

“It’s rare to see him come out alone.”

Some calm individuals sent curious glances towards Masachika.

“Masachika Kuze-kun will be paired with Alisa Kujou, the Student Council’s Treasurer.”

“And Yusho Kiryuin will be paired with me.”

“The two of them will compete…… over there!”

Maria pointed with her hand, and there, in front of the stage, was a grand piano left behind even after the brass band had left. It was being brought to the center of the stage by the staff.

“Yes, the piano. The two of them will take turns playing the piano, and you, the audience, will choose which performance you liked better.”

At that moment, the atmosphere in the venue changed completely to bewilderment.

“Huh, the piano…? Kiryuin has the clear upper hand here.”

“What’s this? How is this even a competition?”

“Wait, Kuze? Can he even play the piano?”

“Well…… I was in the same class as him during our first and third year of junior high school, but there wasn’t anything extraordinary from him, you know…?”

As the unexpected competition unfolded, the atmosphere naturally began to dampen. Especially among the current students, most of them had already turned their gazes cold, thinking, “Ah, this is just a sideshow.”

Anticipating this reaction, Maria and Sumire quickly moved on to the confrontation, cutting short their role as emcees.

“Now, let’s move on to the competition right away.”

“First, we’ll start with Yusho Kiryuin’s performance.”

The other three individuals retreated backstage, and Yusho began his preparations. During that time, bewildered conversations filled the audience.

“Huh, they’re seriously competing with the piano?”

“Wait, what happens when one of them wins? Did they miss explaining the stakes?”

“Oh? Come to think of it…”

Suspicious whispers filled the air, and Yumi, while gazing blankly at the stage, muttered to herself.

“That child…… has been playing the piano?”

And then, almost unconsciously, she sent her gaze to Ayano sitting next to her. Sensing the unspoken question behind that gaze, Ayano calmly answered.

“No, Masachika-sama hasn’t played the piano since that day, as far as I know.”

Upon hearing Ayano’s words, Yumi’s expression clouded. Without looking in her direction, Ayano quietly said.

“I thought you might want to see him perform.”

“……”

A silent struggle lasting for a dozen seconds. Even though Ayano was facing forward, the intense conflict was clearly transmitted to her.

“……”

Finally, Yumi settled back into her chair. Sensing this change in her demeanor, Ayano contemplated.

(But still… for whom will Masachika-sama be playing this time?)

Whenever Masachika played the piano, it was always for someone. Not for the general audience, but for a specific person—sometimes it was for Yumi, sometimes for Yuki, and occasionally for Ayano. But with Yuki nor Alisa not present in this situation, and Masachika unaware of Yumi and Ayano’s presence…. then……

(Masachika-sama…. Who exactly are you playing the piano for?)

Ignoring Ayano’s question, misguided speculation spread among the surrounding students.

“Oh…… so this is like an exhibition match prepared by the festival organizing committee?”

“I see. Now that you mention it, I’ve never heard of Kiryuin-san running for any position before.”

“Ah, I get it. It must have been difficult to have Suou-san and Kujou-san suddenly face off again, so they hurriedly found opponents to go against each other.”

“Besides, it’s strange for a Presidential candidate and a Vice-Presidential candidate to fight one-on-one.”

They reached their own conclusions, and a slight sense of disappointment filled the air. But just as the atmosphere was about to dissipate, Yusho’s performance began, blowing away the somber mood.

◇

The live performance was even more exciting than the five of them had anticipated.

Perhaps it was because Alisa had been working tirelessly on stage to calm the chaos, which had raised the level of attention. The audience seats had been packed since the start of the live performance, and there were also a considerable number of standing spectators. Now, after finishing the performances of two cover songs, it was safe to say that the venue was completely full and thriving. However, Masachika’s figure was still nowhere to be found.

(Masachika-kun……)

The person Alisa wanted to see the most was absent no matter how much she searched; he was nowhere to be found and it casted a shadow of worry in Alisa’s heart. But……

“Alya-san.”

At this moment, she was not alone. There were comrades who cared for her, understanding her emotional state.

(It'll be alright.)

Responding with a gaze to Hikaru, who had called out to her, Alisa scanned the audience. And then, aiming to reach even Masachika, who was invisible, she raised her voice.

"Now, it's time for the final song. Please listen..... 'Yumegen'."

◇

"Amazing! I've never seen a student grasp things so quickly, Sensei!"

"He is undoubtedly a genius. There's no doubt he will become a pianist representing Japan in the future."

Stop it. Stop giving such transparent flattery.

"The performance was so captivating no matter how many times I heard it... Truly fitting for the Piano Prince."

"Indeed... 'Prodigy' is a label befitting for Yusho-san."

Shut up. Don't spout shallow praises.

What do you know about geniuses? What do you know about prodigies? You can say such things because you don't know the real deal. You don't know the melodies that sent chills down your spine. The talent that can engulf a venue with a single note. You don't know, and you probably couldn't even imagine, how those superficial praises make me miserable.

"Oh, isn't that the person over there who was introduced on TV the other day?"

"Yeah, that's right. It's Kiryuin Yusho-kun, who won the gold medal at a competition once.... He's really cool, huh?"

"Oh? But isn't he not the one performing as the finale this time?"

“Well, you know, it’s because he has a good-looking face… That’s how TV works, right? By the way, the finale is performed by the one who won the Best Performance Award.”

“Oh, I see. So Yusho was the runner up, huh?”

“Heh.”

“Haha, he can probably hear you, you know?”

Those words spoken by my peers at a certain recital had been vividly engraved in my young ears and mind. Runner-up. Losing. Only being praised for having a good-looking face. It was a tremendous humiliation.

My lungs trembled, and through the clenched gap of my teeth, it was clear that rough breaths were escaping.

(Don’t screw with me…! You worthless piece of garbage who is far inferior to second place!)

I had the impulse to grab them by the collar right then and there, but I couldn’t. Deep down in my heart, I knew that those words were true.

I could never win against him. I was always, always second best. A genuine genius. A true prodigy. Suou, Masachika.

“Kiryuin-kun, please get ready.”

Called by the staff, as soon as I stepped onto the stage, cheers and applause erupted. After finishing my performance, it transformed into a resounding voice that filled the venue. But… the moment he started playing, the atmosphere in the venue instantly changed. The audience, who had been casually making noise just seconds ago, now didn’t utter a single sound. The tension was reminiscent of being suddenly transported from a children’s concert to a professional orchestra venue.

“Suou-kun, that was amazing!”

“Thank you.”

But…… even after delivering such a breathtaking performance, he… seemed completely uninterested. He swiftly returned to the dressing room, ignoring the praise from the teacher who greeted him,

the audience who belatedly started applauding, and the other performers who looked at him with awe. He didn't even spare a glance at me, who stared at him resentfully.

He was an eyesore. The existence called Suou Masachika was truly cursed. Because of him, any praise I received felt empty and meaningless.

Praises from those who knew him seemed like mere flattery, and praises from those who didn't know him appeared to be the delusions of ignorant people.

To break free from that curse, I devoted myself recklessly. Every day, my fingertips bled, and I pounded the keys until I couldn't hold chopsticks. I grew to hate the piano, which I used to love dearly. Yet, I couldn't quit. Only with the single determination of defeating him, I continued playing the piano.

And yet..... he suddenly disappeared one day, as if he had said, "I'm not interested in the piano anymore." He left me cursed. He didn't show up at any recitals, competitions—nowhere. As I sat there dumbfounded, awards and trophies rolled in prematurely.

"What is this?"

The title I had always wanted, first place, seemed like trash. The praises directed at me still felt empty. The word "runner-up" stuck to my head and wouldn't go away.

"How absurd....."

Why did I work hard for something like this? Why did I take it so seriously? From the beginning, and even before..... Suou, why was it like this?

"Lastly, I'd like to ask about your future dream. Is it still to become a professional pianist?"

The interviewer handed me the microphone, and I plastered a smile on my face to answer.

"No, it's to inherit my father's company and lead it magnificently. Playing the piano is just a hobby to me."

It was foolish to take the piano seriously, wasn't it? Right, Suou?

◇

(That curse..... will be broken today.)

Facing the piano, Yusho felt conflicting emotions of anger and joy swirling in his heart.

The anger towards wretched memories and the sense of humiliation still lingered in his mind, and the dark joy of finally being able to redeem himself from the torment he had suffered for years. Despite his efforts to suppress these emotions, a smile escaped from Yusho's lips uncontrollably.

In front of this audience, he could defeat Masachika Suou. He could prove he was deserving of first place and break free from the curse..... That would be the moment when he could finally face the piano he once loved and the praise directed towards him.

With that in mind, nothing else seemed to matter. He had put in a lot of effort, time, and money to prepare for an upcoming concert, but now, even that seemed insignificant. The only thing that mattered was being able to compete with Masachika Suou once again on the piano. As long as he had this opportunity, it was enough.

(To win perfectly without a shred of doubt)

For that reason, he deliberately requested the same performance order as before. To defeat him, who would be performing last. And moreover..... with his best piece.

With a smile on his lips, Yusho placed his fingers on the keys and began to play.

Chopin's Nocturne No. 2 in E-flat Major, Op. 9.

◇

A beautiful and enchanting melody resounded throughout the venue. It captured the attention of the audience, who had been feeling a sense of anticlimax, and naturally made them straighten their posture.

“Wow, that was amazing! He’s really skilled,” whispered Maria from the wings of the stage, clearly impressed.

“Yes,” Masachika agreed, also in a low voice.

“But is it okay to be impressed? Considering they’re our opponents in the upcoming battle,” Maria asked suspiciously, her eyes filled with doubt. Masachika shrugged his shoulders slightly and casually replied, “Well, I never thought I could win from the beginning.”

“Huh?”

Masachika knew very well that he couldn’t win. The five-year hiatus had been significant. Even if his body remembered the music, his fingers probably wouldn’t move as he intended. He didn’t underestimate the piano nor Yusho, who had been constantly practicing during that time, to the point where he believed he could defeat him.

(Well, as long as I can play without being laughed at, it should be fine.)

But there was no problem. Masachika had already achieved his goal when Yusho accepted this challenge. His objective from the start was to prevent Yusho’s contact with the Raikokai and to convince them to bury the truth of this incident in darkness, as well as give their approval based on the justification that it was just part of the election campaign. To achieve that objective, Masachika had used violence to make them submit, provoking Yusho to lose his composure and accept this unfair contest.

Yes, this contest was unfair. The content of the match heavily favored Yusho, but Masachika didn’t have much at stake even if he lost. Judging by the audience’s reactions earlier, they considered this an unusual contest, where the rules weren’t disclosed and there was no mention of the stakes, as mere entertainment prepared by the Student Council to apologize for the whole commotion. In reality, there were stakes involved, but the compensation for Masachika losing was simply

“not doing anything about Yusho’s suspicions.” Since nothing would be done, it was practically as if he didn’t exist for the audience. Even if Masachika lost in such a match, which was full of unfair elements and lacking in stakes, his honor wouldn’t be significantly damaged. Even if Yusho complained later, he could simply play dumb and say, “Huh? Wasn’t that just for entertainment? We didn’t bet anything.” Since he couldn’t obtain the approval of the Raikokai, it was Yusho who would be troubled by mentioning the stakes.

(I never thought he would swallow my proposal so readily…… I wonder if he had such a trauma from not being able to defeat me in the past? And why did they go out of their way to challenge me with a piece I used to play a lot back then….)

This piece was the first piece by Chopin that Masachika had learnt to play. Since his mother loved Chopin, he often chose to play this piece at concerts where no specific pieces were assigned.

(But it’s amazing how it can give a completely different impression when played by someone else.)

Masachika’s mother and piano teacher used to say that Chopin’s music could become an entirely different piece depending on the person playing it, and it was true.

Yusho’s performance was flawless and skillful, but to Masachika’s ears, it sounded a little too forward-leaning.

(He’s displaying too much competitiveness against me, isn’t he? Well, it does have a captivating power….)

Thinking that way, Masachika self-derisively wondered if he was in a position to evaluate him so arrogantly. Then, to reassure Maria, who was looking at him with a worried gaze, he said, “It’s really okay. Even if I lose, it won’t be much of a problem.”

“….You mean, in terms of the election campaign?” Maria asked.

“Huh?”

Masachika didn’t understand the meaning behind Maria’s words, so he blinked and turned to her. Maria, with a look of genuine concern, grabbed the sleeve of Masachika’s clothes.

“Even if it doesn’t have a significant impact on the election campaign…. If it means you’ll get hurt, we can still stop it now, you know?”

“!”

Masachika was caught off guard by her words, and his expression instantly relaxed.

“Thank you…. but I’m fine, really.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I don’t care about the audience’s eyes or their evaluation. Besides….”

“What?”

He hesitated a little, feeling embarrassed when it came down to it. But he couldn’t lie in front of Maria, who only looked curious and worried. Masachika averted his eyes slightly and spoke.

“Today…. I’m planning to play for Masha-san.”

“Huh?”

“You know…… we made a promise a long time ago. To let you listen to me playing the piano….”

“Ah…”

It was a promise between Saa-kun and Maa-chan. He had promised to invite Maa-chan to a recital to let her listen to his piano performance. However, that promise had never been fulfilled because Maa-chan had returned to Russia.

“This…. You remembered such an old promise.”

“Well, I’m sorry. Honestly, I forgot only until recently.”

“Hehe, I’m happy that you remembered it anyway.”

“….Promises are important, after all.”

Maria tightly squeezed Masachika’s hand with her soft hand, making him feel helpless and embarrassed. Then, just as they were

having their conversation in whispers, Sumire, with a slightly stern expression, interrupted them.

"....I apologize for interrupting your secret conversation, but Yusho-san's performance will be ending soon."

"Oh, sorry."

"....Well, it's fine. Haaaah... Yusho-san is such a pitiful person," Masachika sighed, feeling a sense of awkwardness as he saw Sumire's figure overlapping with Nonoa's. At that moment, Yusho's performance came to an end, and applause erupted throughout the venue.

"Yusho-samaaa!!"

"Princeeee!!"

The loudest cheers came from the female members of the piano club. Responding to their raised hands, Yusho returned backstage.

"Well then, here I go."

"Yeah... Do your best."

Masachika returned a small smile in response to Maria's support, then exchanged places with Yusho and stepped onto the stage. In that brief moment of passing each other, the gaze Yusho cast at Masachika was filled with the same competitive spirit as before.... It made Masachika chuckle wryly.

(Even if he looks at me like that... Well, I have no intention of competing with him, and it wouldn't even be a fair competition...)

No matter how he was glared at, Masachika had neither the will nor the ability to respond. Moreover, there was no obligation for him to do so. To Masachika, Yusho was just a bastard who tried to ruin the cultural festival. He had no sympathy for Yusho, unlike with Nao. Whatever feelings or circumstances Yusho had wasn't Masachika's concern.

(Well, scaring him earlier made me feel a bit relieved.... At this point, I really don't care anymore.)

Rather than that, fulfilling the promise with Maria was more important now.

(Now, what should I play?)

After bowing to the audience and taking a seat at the piano, Masachika started to think, belatedly, about the appropriate piece to dedicate to Maria. And then, he realized.

(No, it's not for Maria… It's for Maa-chan.)

The person Masachika made the promise with was Maria, but it wasn't Maria herself. It was the innocent Maa-chan from that day. The Maa-chan from that day, whom he had parted ways with under a misunderstanding.

At that moment, a conversation Masachika had with his piano teacher resurfaced in his mind.

"Really, Suou-kun can play any piece, can't you? This piece has a difficulty level of F, you know…"

"Is that so? I felt like 'Revolutionary Etude' was more difficult for me…"

"That one is also an F, you know… Oh, by the way, do you know, Suou-kun? The name 'Revolutionary Etude' wasn't given by Chopin himself."[1]

"Huh, really?"

"Yes, many of Chopin's pieces have titles added by other people."

"In that case, could this piece also have one?"

"It does. The name by which this piece is widely known in Japan is—"[2]

At that moment, Masachika chuckled softly and placed his fingers on the piano.

(That's right…… Right now, I won't be Kuze, but Suou.)

That was what his opponent intended. So…… just for now, he could play the part and become Suou again. And for the sake of that distant child from long ago…. who he would dedicate his performance to.

[1]: Revolutionary Etude was composed sometime around 1831, which just so happened to be around the time the Polish instigated an armed revolution against the Russians (November uprising). Chopin was Polish himself, and thus it was said that Revolutionary Etude was composed in response to the fall of Warsaw (of which the Russians had captured), and thus gained its name.

[2]: There is no specific piece that has been mentioned here, but if I had to guess it would be Chopin's Nocturne No. 2 in E-flat Major, Op. 9 (the same piece Yusho had just played) or Chopin's Tristesse (L'Adieu) Op.10 No.3 (thank you sweetsurrender#3851 for raising this second piece up). The former is considered by many (not just the Japanese) to be a "farewell" song, where as the latter's second name (L'Adieu) literally just means farewell, and considering the fact that he's dedicating this performance to "Maa-chan", and said that he'll be "Suou" just for this performance (the former was his signature piece), it seems right. Or who knows I might just be wrong :/

Chapter 10 - I Want To Thank Her And Say Goodbye

The live performance ended amidst great success.

The audience erupted in thunderous applause and cheers, with some even playfully demanding an encore. As Alisa stood at the forefront, she found herself captivated by a strange sensation.

Was there ever a time in her life where so many people directed their smiles towards her? Was there ever a time where she had been sought after by so many?

(Ah, so this is……)

Was this what it truly felt like to be “rewarded?”

For so long, Alisa had been diligently working without receiving any praise. She believed that as long as she herself acknowledged her own efforts, it was sufficient enough. However……

(When I gather the courage to step forward…… I realize there are many people who would recognize me.)

Suddenly, Alisa felt something warm welling up from deep within her chest once again. She tightened her eye muscles, as if to suppress it, and deeply lowered her head.

And amidst the growing applause, Alisa made eye contact with her four bandmates before leaving the stage.

“Woah, that was amazing!”

As soon as he stepped offstage, Takeishi’s body trembled as he donned a bright smile, finding himself unable to contain his excitement. The other four members nodded, their energy slightly heightened.

“Yeah, yeah… It was truly fantastic! This isn’t flattery coming from me either, but that was the best performance we’ve ever done!”

“Yes…… I feel the same way.”

“Oh? Sayacchi, are you on the verge of tears?”

“N-No! That’s not…. true.”

“Oh, really? Are you suuure~?”

“Come on! Nonochan, you’re so persistent! Ahh——”

Inadvertently using an informal nickname, Sayaka showed an awkward expression. Alisa deepened her smile and once again lowered her head.

“Thank you, everyone.”

For recognizing me as a leader. For showing me such a wonderful world view.

The other band members returned her words of gratitude with smiles.

“That line goes for me too! The live show was so amazing because Alya-san’s singing voice was incredible! Oh, of course, Sayaka-san on the bass and Nonoa-san’s keyboard performance were also really good!”

“I can’t help but feel like you’re just being polite…… Well, yes, it was a performance we created together with everyone’s collaboration. There’s no need for gratitude.”

“No, seriously, I’m not just saying that——”

“Well, anyway, leaving Takeshi aside, I had fun too. Thank you, Alisa.”

“Thank you too, Alya-san. Thank you for taking up the role of the vocalist and leading everyone as the bandleader. You were truly reliable.”

“……With this atmosphere, I have no ground to stand on after saying gratitude is unnecessary, do I?”

“Well, if you put it that way, I don’t have the position to either…… Ah, Kano~! Did you see your nii-chan’s impressive performance?”

Alisa watched Takeshi with a mix of amusement and exasperation as he immediately ran towards his younger brother after spotting him

within the crowd. At that moment, the audience noticed Alisa and the other band members and hurriedly approached them.

“Kujou-san! You were seriously cool!”

“Nonoa-sama! That was amazing!”

“Kiyomiya-kun! Look this way!”

The crowd surged forward, shouting in excitement. Hikaru instinctively stepped forward to protect the female band members, but even he attracted intense gazes from the female fans, causing his face to contort with embarrassment.

“Oh man, this is embarrassing…. Well, Alisa, shall we repel them with some fan service?”

“Fan service? Uh, repel?”

Alisa blinked at the unfamiliar abbreviation and the ominous-sounding word. Then, Nonoa casually said,

“Like this.”

With a gesture as if it was nothing, she suddenly donned on a dazzling idol-like smile and gave a twinkling wink.

“Thank you, everyone~☆ But sorry? If we stay here like this, it’ll cause another commotion. Could you please make way for us?”

Immediately after being captivated by perfect fan service, they were promptly asked to move aside. In an instant, various members of the audience themselves started calling out to the people behind them to move, dispersing the crowd.

“See, like that, you know?”

“Well, um? Uh, sorry, I can’t…… do that.”

Feeling unsure about being able to do the same thing, Alisa awkwardly laughed.

“But speaking of which, where did Masachika go….? Is he still busy with the organizing committee?”

At that moment, Alisa also began to look around after hearing the words unexpectedly uttered by Hikaru.

That's right, she wanted to share this excitement and emotion in her heart with him. The world he took her to. The friends he introduced her to. The stage he prepared for her. She wanted to convey these emotions she had obtained there to him right now.

(Masachika-kun....!)

As she held her restless feelings and let her gaze wander, suddenly, one voice jumped into Alisa's ears.

"Huh, really!? A showdown!?"

Involuntarily drawn to such attention-grabbing words, Alisa reflexively turned towards them. There, she saw a male student talking excitedly to a girl next to him, holding a smartphone in his hand.

"Hey! They're having a showdown in the auditorium! A piano duel!"

"Huh, who?"

"Kiryuin and Kuze! It's already started!"

What reached her ears was the name of the boy she had been searching for. Along with the torrent of information that rushed in, Alisa became dumbfounded.

(Masachika-kun...? A showdown? A piano duel... Why? What does it mean?)

She let her gaze wander as if seeking answers from someone.... and suddenly noticed that Hikaru, right in front of her, was frozen, fixated on one spot.

"Hikaru-kun? What's wr—"

Following his gaze, Alisa spotted three people standing with complex expressions. She had an intuition that they were the former band members of Hikaru and Takeshi.

"Hikaru-k—"

“Go, Alisa.”

“Huh?”

Alisa turned around at the voice from behind and saw Nonoa looking back at her with lazy half-opened eyes.

“You’re worried about Kuzecchi, aren’t you? We’re fine here, so go.”

“Alright, then..... Kurazawa-senpai! Can I ask for your help?”

Upon Sayaka’s call, Kurazawa Shiu, the girl in glasses dressed as a knight, a member of the Disciplinary Committee, appeared sharply. With her glasses pushed up, she spoke.

“Alisa Kujou’s bodyguard, right? I can do that.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Well then, let’s clear the way.”

Following that nonchalant voice, Nonoa exploded with her fan service and made more requests to clear the way. Like the crossing of the Red Sea[1], the crowd split, creating a narrow path. Alisa followed behind Shiu, running

(Masachika-kun.... Why?)

Questions swirled in her mind. Alongside them, an indescribable sense of uneasiness and impatience welled up, making it hard for Alisa to bring her thoughts together. It felt as if Masachika had gone to a distant place..... Such an ominous premonition lingered in the back of her mind. In order to dispel it, she ran. She believed that this restlessness was just her imagination, and once she saw him, all her anxiety would vanish. With that belief, Alisa ran.

With Shiu’s guidance, Alisa smoothly arrived at the auditorium and took a moment to catch her breath in front of the door before bowing her head to Shiu.

“Thank you, Kurazawa-senpai.”

“No problem. Well then, I’ll go back to the stage.”

“Okay.”

Parting ways with Shiu, Alisa turned towards the doors of the auditorium once again.

“……Alright.”

Taking a deep breath, she pushed open the large double doors and stepped inside.

What awaited her was…… silence. Amidst the silence, the sound of a piano echoed. That was all.

(This is….)

The melody that met her ears was like moonlight illuminating the surface of the lake. A tranquil space where even the slightest sound felt hesitant to make a noise.

Walking slowly through that space…… Alisa caught sight of the boy who was creating this atmosphere.

(Masachika, you…)

He was the boy Alisa had been searching for; and yet, he wasn’t. He was a Masachika she did not know at all.

The Masachika she knew never once revealed his true feelings like this. He would always hide his true emotions behind silly jokes and his usual playful demeanor. He never once revealed his true self with his music, exposing everything in the process.

(Stop……)

Alisa realized it too. This song was a love song dedicated to one, and only one, person.

His dancing fingers instructed the piano to create such resounding tones, as if it was his whole being playing the music, and his intense feelings of longing and sorrows he kept hidden were conveyed.

Alisa felt intense jealousy towards the person to whom it was directed.

(No! No!!)

A childish voice exploded inside her chest. She wanted to cover her ears and close her eyes at that moment. She didn't want anyone else to see the true self he was showing.

She didn't want him to show that. Not to anyone else.

(I was supposed to be his partner..... I was supposed to be the closest to him. I should have been the one who knew Masachika the most!)

Unruly emotions overwhelmed her, and she couldn't contain the overflowing feelings. Without fully understanding herself, Alisa felt the urge to cry, to scream, as she tightly clenched her fists.

He felt distant. The farthest he had ever been. Even though she thought she could stand by his side. Even though she thought she was getting closer to his true self. Once again, he..... flew away on his own, far away.

【My Wizard...】

Alisa's small, small mummer was drowned out by the sound of the piano.

◇

The feeling of accomplishment was something I never quite understood. It was true that I would be happy if my grandfather acknowledged me, if my mother praised me, or if my sister was delighted. I understood that much. But I don't understand the feeling of accomplishment itself. Maybe because.....

Somewhere in my heart, I always felt a sense of emptiness. And since leaving the Suou family, that emptiness was all that remained within me.

I spent my days carrying that emptiness in my free and mundane paternal grandparents' house. One day, while casually watching a children's anime on TV, I realized the cause of this emptiness.

「I have a dream! No matter how big the obstacles are, I will never give up!」

In the TV show, the talentless protagonist was desperately striving towards his dream.

Even those who initially sneered at his earnestness were eventually drawn to his unwavering determination and began to support him. He faced trials and tribulations, sometimes experiencing setbacks, but through his strong passion and unwavering efforts, he achieved resounding success.

He truly was the protagonist. Everyone supported him, celebrating his victory of hard work. And he, while being blessed by everyone, reached the happiest of endings together with the heroine who had supported him all along.

……Struggles, setbacks, passion, effort. None of them were familiar to me.

What I had was an excessive and wasted talent, and going through effortless processes reminiscent of leveling up in a game. Even if I easily achieved success through such means, there could be no sense of accomplishment. Who would support someone like me? Who would celebrate my success? Surely, my success was something no one would ever wish for……

As the emptiness grew inside my chest, I became indifferent towards everything. It was during that time…… when I had lost all hope and was consumed by apathy…… that she gave me hope.

She appeared like a miracle, my heroine. If she could support me, if she could celebrate me, I couldn't care less about what others think.

Her smile was my hope. Her smile alone filled my emptiness. The memories I had once sealed deep within my heart as something unpleasant, they turned out to be untrue. Now that years, and years, of misunderstanding have been cleared…… I feel nothing but gratitude towards her.

(So……)

That's why I will fulfill this promise and finally bring it all to an end. In order to settle the past love and move forward without lingering regrets. I will convey the words I couldn't say that day, with a smile to that girl. Our meeting was a miracle, and it was never an unfortunate thing. With heartfelt gratitude and love……

【Thank you for everything…. Goodbye….】

Whispering so, as he released his hands from the keys, Masachika closed his eyes for a moment. Behind his eyelids, he saw her, wearing the same innocent smile as before…… Masachika couldn't help but smile wryly at his own convenience.

And feeling a little refreshed by the fact that he was able to smile, he stood up after the lingering resonance of the music had completely faded away. He bowed to the silent audience as if natural and left the stage.

◇

After Masachika disappeared backstage, applause erupted, albeit belatedly. Amidst the applause, Ayano continued to gently stroke Yumi's back without clapping.

"Madam……"

"I'm sorry…… I'm so sorry……"

With her face buried in a handkerchief, Yumi repeated her apologies while sobbing, as if crushed with regret.

In the far back, where they were unnoticed by Masachika, a group of people lined up and applauded.

"……Who is he? He doesn't seem like an unknown pianist."

One man raised his voice, but no one else answered. Some of them glanced at Gensei with inquisitive eyes, but seeing him maintain his silence, everyone fell silent.

"However, it's a shame."

In response to another woman's voice, they all agreed one after another.

"Yes, truly a shame."

"But he can't win against something like this, there's no help for it."

Nodding gravely to those words, the oldest man pronounced in a cold voice.

"We'll acknowledge his courage and ambition to cause such a commotion..... But falling short during the final stretch renders it meaningless."

Having said that, he turned on his heel and called out to Touya, who had come as a guide.

"Shall we go back?"

"Huh, is it alright if we don't see the result?"

"No need to see it."

".....Understood. Then this way, please."

And so, they left the auditorium following Touya's lead.

◇

"So, how did I end up winning?"

As he went through the stage exit, Masachika grumbled.

After finishing the performance, they immediately moved on to the voting by a raise of hands..... but the result was completely unexpected for Masachika. After all, it was quite clear that Masachika had won. It wasn't even a close contest. The teachers and staff, who were trying to count the votes, exchanged glances as if to say, "Wait, isn't it obvious just by looking at this?"

".....Masha-san, did you do something behind the scenes?"

Masachika asked Maria, who had come along, about one-third seriously, and Maria pouted her cheeks.

“I didn’t do anything, you know? How rude.”

“Well, I mean…… you know?”

While smiling wryly with a playful attitude, Masachika could feel his heart gradually growing colder.

He had won. The fact that he won only amplified the emptiness inside Masachika.

(Haaah, life is such a rigged game……)

With a victory that he despised, Masachika smiled emptily. And then, Maria suddenly showed a gentle expression and embraced Masachika head-on.

“O-Oh?”

“Thank you for keeping your promise…… It was a wonderful performance, I almost felt like crying.”

“……I see, I’m glad to hear that”

With Maria’s words, Masachika felt a little bit of the emptiness being filled. Although he still lacked a sense of achievement from such an unfair victory, Maria’s praise…… just like before, comforted Masachika’s heart.

With nostalgia, he slowly let go of himself and entrusted himself to Maria with a calm feeling.

(No…… Wait, this is getting too long.)

Her embrace was long. Or rather, it was getting more and more passionate. It felt like she was even tiptoeing and rubbing her cheeks against his!

(Uh-oh, this is a bit dangerous. It’s different from before! The softness and everything, it’s just different!)

As Masachika was about to pull himself away from Maria, having his sense of crisis reaching its peak, Maria suddenly released the embrace on her own.

And then, looking at Masachika, who seemed relieved but also a little disappointed, Maria innocently smiled.

“Saa-kun, you’re so cute ♡”

“Ah, well……”

“Hehehe, I still like Kuze-kun after all.”

“Ah—”

Casually and without any falsehoods, such words reached Masachika, who reflexively frowned. Seeing that expression, Maria mixed a slightly sad smile with her smile.

“I’m sorry. I just wanted to say it. I didn’t mean to trouble you.”

“No, it’s……”

Masachika faltered, unable to continue saying, “I’m happy,” as such words got stuck in his throat.

(I like Masha-san as a person, but…… as I thought she’s just different from that girl, you know?)

Masachika couldn’t direct the same feelings he had for Maa-chan towards the Maria in front of him now. However,

(But I’ve settled my feelings for that girl…… maybe, someday……)

With these thoughts, Masachika gazed at Maria as complicated emotions lingered deep within him. In response, Maria furrowed her brows even more, looking increasingly melancholic, as she said,

“Well, if……”

She was about to say something when suddenly,

“Masachika-kun!!”

A sharp voice called out from the side.[2]

“Eh…… Alya?”

Surprised, Masachika turned around to see Alisa, dressed in her live performance outfit, with a very urgent expression on her face.

“What’s wrong….? Did something happen?”

Concerned by her unusual behavior, Masachika asked with a worried voice, but Alisa clenched her teeth and swallowed her words.

“Um, could you…. go over there with me?”

“Huh, what….?”

“It’s okay. Just come.”

With a gentle tap on his shoulder and a smile, Masachika was urged by Alisa, and he lightly nodded before heading towards her.

As Masachika left with her, occasionally glancing behind him, Maria waved with a smile. Then, she murmured quietly with a slightly sorrowful tone,

【If only we had made a proper promise to meet again at that time~ But that would have been a bit excessive, won’t it?】

◇

“Using manipulation and deceit, only to be completely defeated in your area of expertise..... How disgraceful,”

Sumire mummered, as she stood next to the tidied grand piano backstage in the auditorium, having looked at the contents of the envelope handed to her by Masachika. Without really listening to her, Yusho silently placed his hands on the piano, continuing to gaze at the keys.

“So, what about it? Why do you have such a composed expression?”

Yusho responded after a moment to Sumire’s somewhat solemn question.

“Sumire-neesan..... I still love the piano, after all.”

“Oh, you finally realized that now?”

It was quite a significant confession from his perspective, but Yusho chuckled as Sumire responded so casually.

(Truly, I can’t compare to Sumire-neesan...)

He had been deceiving himself all this time.

He pretended that playing piano was just a hobby, convincing himself that it wasn’t something to be taken seriously. He ran away from facing his true feelings by seeking something to replace playing the piano..... He convinced himself that inheriting his father’s legacy was his goal in life. But he couldn’t lie anymore.

For the first time in a while, he faced the piano head-on, giving it his all, and ultimately ending in defeat..... He couldn’t help but acknowledge the overwhelming passion he had for the piano.

Masachika’s performance was different from anything he had heard before. It was a completely different level of playing, as if it wasn’t the same as his. Masachika’s piano was crying. It was screaming. Technically speaking, Yusho didn’t feel like he had lost. However, he couldn’t help but feel like being defeated was a natural course of events.

There was something in Masachika's performance that made him feel that way.

He didn't know what it was yet, but he believed he should search for it. For now, he could only regret not being able to truly confront Masachika when he was at his full strength.

(I'm sorry, I've been facing you with half-hearted feelings all along)

As an apology, he lightly touched the piano keys. From now on, he decided to face it more earnestly. He didn't know if he would have another confrontation with Masachika in the future. But if it happened, he wouldn't have any regrets the next time.

"Sumire-neesan."

"Yes?"

"I..... I'm thinking of aiming for a music college."

"That's fine, isn't it?"

"Huh?"

Yusho turned around when Sumire replied just as casually. Then, Sumire looked back at him with a truly exasperated expression.

"I have long since seen through the fact that you didn't really truly desire to inherit the Kiryuin Group. Don't worry, leave it to me, I'll proudly inherit it."

"Ahahaha....."

Yusho let out a dry laugh in response to Sumire's confident statement.

"I see, you saw through everything, huh....."

"Yes. Especially your habit of trying to distract yourself with something else when you can't have what you truly desire. It's quite obvious."

"Is that so...?"

“Yes. Since you were young, when the swings were occupied, you would artificially become lively in the sandbox, or whenever chocolate ice cream was sold out, you would pile up other flavors…”

“Uh……”

“And it’s still the same now. Just because the girl you really like doesn’t pay any attention to you, you surround yourself with girls you don’t even like.”

“Huh?”

Yusho was speechless at Sumire’s words. Cold sweat suddenly ran down his back. He never expected her to see through him to that extent……

“I don’t know who the lucky girl is, but even if you surround yourself with other girls as a provocation, she won’t turn her attention to you.”

“……Ah, yeah.”

Yusho nodded earnestly with a serious expression as Sumire shook her head with a mix of exasperation and disappointment. A mixture of relief and regret overwhelmed him, but he took a deep breath to change his mood.

“Well, even if I say I want to aim for a music college…… it’s not something I can decide right away.”

“That’s true. First…”

“Yeah, first I’ll consult with my father…… Though he might not easily approve.”

“……That’s not the case.”

“Huh?”

When Yusho raised his head in response to the unexpected denial, Sumire waved the paper she held in the envelope, fluttering it gently.

“First, you have to shave your head, right?”

“……Huh?”

“You’ve done something mischievous again, haven’t you? If you’ve done something bad, you should start by shaving your head and then performing a dogeza.”

Upon hearing those words and seeing the sentence written on the paper that Sumire held—“Regarding the incident that occurred at today’s school festival, Kiryuin Yusho will confess what he did in front of all the students”—Yusho’s cheek twitched.

“T-That’s..... in front of all the students?”

“Of course. You lost, after all.”

“But... shaving my head and bowing weren’t part of the conditions—”

“As a Japanese man.....”

Interrupting Yusho’s words, Sumire pointed her index finger squarely at his chest. Then, she knocked on his chest one by one, as if piercing it with each tap.

“Shave—Your—Head—And—Per—form—A—Do—ge—za. Desuwa.”

Confronted by words from his cousin that he couldn’t possibly accept, Yusho furrowed his brow defiantly.....

“De—su—wa?”

“.....Fine.”

Confronted with Sumire’s gaze, Yusho obediently nodded. In many ways, Sumire was his greatest weakness.

◇

“O-oi, Alya? What’s wrong?”

Despite asking the silver-haired Alisa, who steadily walked ahead, she only returned his question with silence and continued tugging his hand along. It had been like this since earlier. Masachika couldn’t tell if

she was angry or anxious, and he couldn't quite grasp the reason as to why she was like this in the first place..... Although he had some guesses as to why, he didn't truly know if that was truly the case.

"Hey, where are we going? Did the live performance go well?"

Masachika attempted to start a conversation, but Alisa remained silent as ever. Before he realized it, they had arrived at the back of the club building, an entirely deserted area. Finally, Alisa stopped and turned around.

Then, as soon as she turned around, she glared at him in silence, causing Masachika's cheeks to twitch.

"So, you're mad after all? Was it because I couldn't come to see the live performance? Or was it because I went off and had a showdown against an opposing candidate on my own? Well, sorry, I know I'm just making excuses, but was there a proper reason?"

As the distance between them closed, Masachika reflexively took half a step back. However, before he could retreat any further, the distance between the two became zero.

"Oh, eh?"

Alisa suddenly hugged him from the front, embracing him tightly..... Masachika inadvertently let out a silly voice.

"A-Alya? Seriously, what's wrong?"

Completely perplexed and unable to understand the situation, Masachika asked while Alisa remained silent. Without saying a word, she tightens her grip on his back, exerting force in the arms wrapped around him, squeezing tightly.

(Huh, what does this mean? What kind of emotion is this?)

First of all, being embraced by Alisa was an entirely new experience. Well, rather than being embraced, it might be more appropriate to say that she was clinging on to him....?

(Wh-Why is she silent? She feels incredibly soft and I can smell a pleasant scent, but there's also a sense of strength. Is this really Alya? Could her inner self have changed somehow? Like, what if I let my

guard down and get all lovey-dovey with her and then she would suddenly open her mouth wide and bite me—)

Just as he was thinking that……

“!? Ouch!? Ow ow ow!?”

He was genuinely bitten on the neck, causing Masachika to scream in pain.

“What on earth is going on? Some kind of parasite? Has someone taken over your body? Or are you now a zombie? Did you get infected by some zombie virus?”

Even as his confused mind shouted that far, the feeling of teeth sinking into his neck disappeared. In its place, a soft sensation pressed against him, and before he knew it, his face was buried in her shoulder.

“……Alya?”

“……”

(Hmm, what is this? Why is she like a sulking child clinging to their parent with a pouty face……?)

Even though he didn’t understand the situation, Masachika tried to calm her down by gently patting her back. Then, he faintly heard a few words spoken in Russian.

【You are my partner, right….?】

Whispering those words, Alisa tightened her grip on his arm once more.

After that, Alisa’s embrace continued until she was called by Touya on her phone.

[1]: The event described in the Hebrew Bible (or in Judaism or even in other Abrahamic religions in general) where Moses (a Judaist prophet) helped the Israelites, fleeing from the Egyptians, by splitting the Red Sea open in order to create a clear path for the Israelites to cross over.

Epilogue - Now, Only At This Moment

"After tallying the results, the Excellence Award goes to the girls' kendo club's performance."

"Ohhhh!"

"Well, that seems fair."

"Their swordplay was so powerful……"

"Sumire-senpai was amazing……"

"And the Special Award goes to the joint project of Class 1-D and Class 1-F and their Maid Cafe."

"……Ah, I see."

"Oh, what's with this overwhelming first place…… Even though it was a joint effort, they completely dominated."

"Ah, the President didn't go?"

"Well, that was…. how should I put it… you know."

"I felt like we caught a glimpse of the terrifying nature of the idol industry……"

As the school festival came to an end with each class and club focused on cleaning up, the Festival Executive Committee held its final meeting. Alisa had finished her duties as the Treasurer and was attending the meeting, but honestly, she was mostly tuning out.

(Haaaah…… Why did I do something like that……)

She remembered what she had done to Masachika after his showdown with Yuusho. Driven by emotions she couldn't quite understand herself, she had done something truly incomprehensible. Now, looking back after going through the committee's work, all she felt was regret.

(What was I even doing..... clinging onto him like that, biting him, and even kissing him..... I just don't understand anymore.)

At that time, all Alisa wanted was for Masachika to look only at her, and for her to be the only one looking at Masachika. She found it frustrating how Masachika could act so nonchalant about it all..... And before she knew it, she had done those things.

(Ah.... I wonder if I'm actually a possessive person.....)

Alisa didn't intend to deny that Masachika was a special person to her. Aside from her childhood, he was her first friend, her partner in the election campaign, and someone comparable to that of a wizard who showed her various worlds. Alisa probably thought of Masachika as even more special than he thought of her.

(So, I wonder.....)

Does Masachika also seek the same level of "specialness" from her? Was that the true nature of this possessiveness...? But honestly, all of these emotions are so new to her that she didn't understand them well.

(I'm really a beginner when it comes to interpersonal relationships.....)

Through her band activities, Alisa gained more friends and improved her social skills to some extent, but that also made her realize that she still had a lot to learn. She was still not good at naturally putting on a friendly smile, didn't know what to say when speaking, and couldn't gauge the appropriate distance one should have with others.....

(Well.... but what I did was just too much.)

No matter how she tried to justify it, biting him out of nowhere was just nonsensical. She was not a dog. It was an outrageous act that couldn't be defended with excuses like lack of experience or clumsiness.

(Ah, why did I do something like that.... But Yuki-san did the same thing before, right? She gave him bite marks.... And seeing that, I felt this overwhelming urge to do the same.....)

She glanced at Yuki, who was watching the progress of the meeting with a composed expression, and then at the adjacent

Masachika next to her. And seeing the adhesive plaster hiding the bite marks, Alisa felt incredibly sorry.

(Ah, this is the worst…. I have to apologize later…… But how do I apologize……)

Even though she didn't even understand why she bit him herself, she was at a loss on how she was going to explain her actions while offering an apology. Maybe she should let him bite her back using the principle of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." ……No, that would just make the situation even more incomprehensible.

(Ugh…. I just want to disappear. Someone, please help me……)

Just as she was inwardly lamenting the perplexing problem, the Chairperson of the Executive Committee stood up.

"Alright! Well, today we had various troubles, but thanks to everyone's cooperation, there weren't any serious injuries, and we managed to get through without getting lectured by the higher-ups in the Raikokai! We made it through somehow! Thank you all!"

Saying that, the Chairperson bowed along with the Vice-Chairperson and smiled confidently.

"Good job, everyone, after a whole month of hard work! Now, enjoy the after-party to your heart's content! Oh, but those who still have work to do, take it easy, okay?"

Finally, eliciting a bit of laughter, the Chairperson spread their arms wide.

"Now, let's finish with one final cheer! Join me, everyone!"

In response to the cue, everyone stood up. They held their hands out in front in unison, and the Chairperson set the rhythm.

"Iyoooo!"

Clap!!!

The sound of clapping hands echoed multiple times, and the 66th Seirei Gakuen School Festival came to a close with the dissolution of the Executive Committee.

◇

“Alya”

As Alisa was about to leave the conference room, she was called out from behind, causing her to flinch. She turned slightly to look over her shoulder and responded indifferently to Masachika, who called out to her.

“What is it?”

“Oh~ Do you have time later? There’s something I want you to accompany me for……”

Alisa hesitated at Masachika’s offer. To be honest, she didn’t have any particular plans. She had thought about helping with tidying up the classroom if there was still work left. Now that the committee work was over, there was nothing else she needed to do. However, she realized that it would be pointless to honestly convey that.

They had been working together, after all. Masachika would probably already be aware that Alisa didn’t have any plans for later. Instead of lying and feeling downhearted, it would be better to apologize here and settle things gracefully. With that judgment, Alisa nodded slightly over her shoulder.

“Well, sure.”

“That’s great. Will you come with me then?”

Following Masachika, Alisa left the conference room. As they walked through the dimly lit corridor, Alisa stared at Masachika’s back, thinking about how to broach the subject.

(Sorry for biting you so suddenly…… But wait, how can I even explain my actions?)

Alisa racked her brain for some reason, even if it was an excuse.

But the first thing that came to mind was the impromptu showdown Masachika had held. However, Alisa had already received an

explanation from Masachika himself regarding the circumstances afterward. Hearing the details that were only disclosed to the Student Council officers and the Executive Committee members, she didn't feel like bringing it up again now..... No, that was a problem even before that.

(My anger itself was unreasonable.....)

There was no reason or logic behind it. Alisa had acted selfishly and taken such actions.

(Really, it was foolish.....)

No matter how close they got physically, it didn't mean their hearts were getting closer. Even if she used her feminine charm to bring out his genuine expressions, it didn't mean she could draw out his true feelings. From the time they met until now, nothing had changed. Masachika remained a presence that was close yet distant to Alisa.

(Someday..... Masachika-kun will drift away from my side.)

Masachika could do anything on his own and go anywhere. When that time comes, Masachika would follow his heart and go somewhere else. And..... Alisa, who cannot fly so freely, surely wouldn't be able to go along with him.

(Oh no.... I feel like crying.)

Suddenly, her chest trembled, and Alisa blinked. At that moment, Masachika stopped.

"Hmm? This place....."

Ignoring Alisa, who tilted her head to confirm their destination, Masachika opened the door.

"Come in."

And as instructed, Alisa stepped into the handcraft club room, where a familiar female student was waiting.

"Oh, you came, Kuze-san."

"Sorry for asking you a favor, Slit-paisen."

“No problem at all. But you’ll owe me a lot now, right?”

“If I become the Vice President, I’ll repay you twice as much.”

“Hahaha! I’d definitely want the both of you to win then~”

As the two exchanged friendly words, Alisa looked at them with a somewhat complex expression. Then the female student’s gaze turned toward Alisa.

“So, shall we begin, Kujou-san?”

“Eh. W—What?”

“Well, anyway, come over here.”

“Huh?”

With a sense of confusion, she glanced at Masachika, but he only urged her with his gaze. And before she knew it, Alisa was led into the adjacent storage room where they took photos yesterday.

“Um….?”

“Alright, then change into that over there.”

“Eh?”

When Alisa looked at where the female student was pointing, she saw a pure white dress adorned on a mannequin in the space by the window that they had used yesterday.

“Well, go ahead and change quickly. It should fit, but if it doesn’t, we’ll adjust it in a hurry. Ah, and here are the shoes.”

“Eh, um, w-what is this?”

“Well~ come on~!”

Ignoring her question, Slit-Paisen cheerfully urged Alisa to change into the dress without giving her a chance to understand what was happening.

“Perfect! The size is just right! As expected of me. Kuze-san, I’m done over here.”

Celebrating her accomplishment with a triumphant pose, Slit-Paisen quickly left the room.

“….What should I do?”

Left alone in the storage room, Alisa felt uncomfortable and fidgeted. However, she was soon called by Masachika, and after checking her own attire, she left the storage room.

“Oh…. It suits you very well. You look beautiful.”

As Masachika said that with a smile, Alisa was amazed by his attire. Even in the dimly lit room, his knight’s outfit, predominantly white and blue, was dazzling. With his hair slightly styled and smoothed, Masachika chuckled at Alisa’s speechless reaction.

“Oi, stop being so silent.”

“Uh, well……”

“No, don’t say anything. You don’t have to! I’m making you dress up, after all!”

After almost blurting out “You look cool,” Alisa was stopped by Masachika and swallowed her words. Instead, she asked the question she had been holding onto for a while.

“What is all this, exactly?”

“Well, you see……”

Masachika awkwardly rested his hand on the back of his neck.

“We made a promise yesterday…. well, more accurately, it was a while ago. To go around the school festival together.”

“Ah……”

“No, I’m really sorry. We ran out of time in the end, and not only that, I couldn’t even watch the you guys’ live performance…. It’s only understandable that you’d be angry, yeah.”

Saying so, Masachika pointed to the adhesive plaster on his neck. Alisa was overwhelmed by his consideration for her regrets and struggles, and her heart tightened, realizing that there was no need to

apologize. He wasn't going to ask why she did such a thing. That was what Masachika was telling her.

(Ah....)

Feeling touched by his kindness, Alisa felt like crying again. Whether he noticed it or not, Masachika averted his gaze and spoke while looking down diagonally.

"Well, anyway.... It ended up being during the evening festival after all, but as Alya told me once, I thought I would properly invite you in my own way."

After a light cough, Masachika knelt down where he was. Then, he blinked a little and wore a faint smile.

"Just for now, allow me to treat you like a princess, okay?"

Saying so in a playful manner, Masachika gently extended his hand to Alisa.

"Princess, may I have the honor of being your partner for the dance at the evening festival?"

It was an invitation to the evening festival dance, accompanied by a cheesy yet romantic gesture. Alisa's heart raced, and she couldn't help but smile softly.

"Oh, come on, what's that.... Are you trying to imitate Kiryuin-senpai?"

"What's wrong with being the perfect gentleman?"

"What's your true intention?"

"Do you think I can do something like this seriously in a sober state?"

"Pfft, ahaha....."

Laughing at Masachika's honest words, Alisa felt joy spreading in her chest.

Though it was mixed with jokes as usual, Masachika was looking only at Alisa. He truly desired her from the bottom of his heart.

(Just for now…. Masachika-kun is truly my partner, isn't he?)

Coincidentally, at this moment, the two of them held the same sentiment. Only for now, at this very moment.

Unaware that their feelings were overlapping, Alisa, with somewhat theatrical gestures, placed her hand on top of Masachika's, following his lead.

"Yes, please take care of me."

She said, smiling mischievously,

Хоть навсегда.

With that, she playfully smiled and at that moment, a faint shutter sound could be heard. They turned towards the direction of the sound, and Masachika frowned with a piercing gaze.

“Oi, Slit. Don’t take pictures without permission.”

“Don’t shorten my name like that. It’s a good memory, right? Look.”

Saying so, Alisa looked at the screen of the smartphone that was being held up, capturing the two of them holding hands with smiles on their faces. Alisa shrunk her shoulders in embarrassment. Glancing quickly, she noticed that Masachika was also looking at her. Their eyes met, but he quickly averted them. Then, a voice expressing admiration reached their ears.

“You two look great together. It’s no surprise to see you exchange passionate words on stage.”

“….Huh?”

Furrowing her eyebrows upon hearing those words, Alisa turned around to see Slit-Paisen, blinking in surprise.

“Huh? Don’t tell me you haven’t realized? It’s a huge topic right now. Apparently, Kujou-san said something like ‘I believe in you’ to Kuze-san on stage.”

“….Huh? Why——”

In a state of shock, Alisa’s mind flashed back to that moment.

Masachika telling her to “trust me and wait for me” and Alisa clenching her hands in front of her chest, responding with “I believe in you.”

….While clenching her hands, in front of her chest.

In those hands was a microphone.

A microphone that happened to be switched-on.

“A-Ah… AAh……”

With a terrifying sense of foreboding, Alisa let out a voice that trembled in shock. In response, the female student gave her a thumbs-up with a smile.

“Like I said before, it’s a huge topic right now. If you both go to the schoolyard in those outfits, you’ll undoubtedly be the main characters of the evening festival!”

With that unwitting blow, Alisa’s sense of shame reached its limit.

“N-No wayyyyy!!”

Her scream reverberated through the evening shadows of the club building.

[1]: Here, Alya is saying, “Though, forever.”

Bookwalker SS - The Day Slit-Paisen Was Born

The following is a story from the time when Masachika served as the Vice President of the student council during junior high school.

“Now, let’s start discussing the gymnasium stage plans.”

As Masachika, serving as a member of the school festival organizing committee, announced the start of the meeting, a tense atmosphere filled the student council room.

(Oh boy, this is going to be a tough one. Even though it’s not my problem, it’s still kinda nerve wrecking.)

While thinking so inwardly, Masachika proceeded with the meeting in a calm manner as the Chairman.

“Well, um… based on the submitted applications from each club, the total time requested for the proposed plans currently exceeds the overall time slot by one hour. Considering there’s no room for other stage performances, I hope we can somehow accommodate and stay within the allocated time……”

While Masachika was speaking, the representatives of various clubs gathered in this room had all their gazes focused on one girl. Partly because she was the reason this meeting was convened…. but more simply, it was also due to her choice of attire.

(Huh, why is she wearing a cheongsam?)

That thought was likely shared not only by Masachika but also by everyone present. While other students were dressed in their regular uniforms, the female student in question was the only one wearing a bright red cheongsam. Moreover, the slit[1] was incredibly deep. Since she was sitting on a sofa, it drew even more attention. In addition, the fact that she was a fairly innocent-looking beauty further played a part. Clearly, some of the boys couldn’t help but sneak glances at her thighs visible through the slit.

(She's even crossing her legs deliberately…. Is she some kind of Chinese mafia princess? It would be perfect if there was a tough bodyguard standing behind her.)

Upon finishing his speech, Masachika turned to the head of the Light Music Club, who addressed the female student.

"Um, the Handicraft Club, right? As far as I remember, the Handicraft Club hasn't participated in stage performances in previous years…. So, why now?"

In the form of a question, which took the shape of criticism, the female student serving as the head of the Handicraft Club responded with a smile.

"Well, the idea of trying it out has been floating around in our club for a while. But somehow, we always felt like we couldn't secure a stage performance…. However, since we had the chance this time, we decided to apply."

Upon hearing the words spoken with a smile, the president of the Light Music Club's face showed a slight expression of embarrassment.

Indeed, in recent years, it had become an implicit understanding that certain established groups would secure designated time slots for the gymnasium stage performances during the middle school festival. Among them, the Drama Club and the Light Music Club were the ones taking a significant amount of time, using the justification of "it has always been that way." Objectively speaking, what should have been stage performances open to anyone had become a situation where a few groups effectively monopolized them, using tradition as basis for such justifications.

Nevertheless, no one had openly complained about it until now…. until the Handicraft Club boldly brought their about plan. Furthermore, their proposal was for a significantly long time slot of one hour.

"However, this 'SEIREI Collection' is……"

Upon looking at the copy of the project proposal and confirming its contents, the president of the Light Music Club frowned. In response, the president of the Handicrafts Club stood up with a smile on her face.

“Isn’t it great? Our club members will walk the runway wearing the costumes we made!”

She extended her arms grandly, just like a stage actress, and enthusiastically explained her vision. The cheongsam she wore, on full display, caught everyone’s attention. Especially the slit.

(I see, that’s why.)

This attire served as an easy-to-imagine example for the concept. As the male students in the room looked at her, they likely imagined the sight of beautiful female students wearing provocative costumes that stimulate their fetishes, strutting confidently on the runway. It seemed even the Light Music Club president was not an exception, as he cleared his throat with a slightly awkward expression before making a composed remark.

“No, there’s no way we could have a runway. Do you have any idea how much time it takes to set up and dismantle it? We have a modular stage that can be assembled, but adjusting its height takes time and it can be dangerous, you know?”

The Light Music Club president expressed a reasonable opinion based on his experience. However, the Handicraft Club president didn’t back down.

“Then we can set it up the day before and dismantle it after the school festival ends. We can just leave the runway in place the whole time, right?”

“What? N-No, no way! That would be such a hassle! It will definitely be in the way! Plus, it will reduce the seating space! Right?”

The Light Music Club president casted his gaze at members of other clubs. In response, the Drama Club president, who held as much influence as the Light Music Club in this setting, spoke up.

“I think it’s a good idea.”

“Eh….?”

The Light Music Club president was taken aback by this unexpected betrayal. However, Masachika understood.

(Oh, the Drama Club often relies on the Handicraft Club for costume-related affairs……)

Apparently, the groundwork had been laid in advance.

(This cheongsam wearing president is stronger than I thought.)

As Masachika admired the Handicraft Club president's skill and expressed his genuine admiration inwardly, the Light Music Club president, in a state of confusion, raised a question to the Drama Club president.

"A-Are you serious?"

"It's interesting, don't you think? The Light Music Club could also use it for performances, right? Professional musicians sometimes have vocalists or guitarists walk the runway to interact with the audience, you know."

"Well, um, that's…. certainly true, but……"

"The Dance Club and Juggling Club could also come up with new performances if there's a runway, couldn't they?"

Upon hearing the Drama Club president's words, the members of other clubs start to contemplate with serious expressions. Masachika, too, initially thought the plan was absurd but now it seemed like it might actually work. He sincerely admired the skills of the president of the Handicrafts Club and offered his modest support as a member of the organizing committee.

"By the way, regarding the runway, if we borrow a modular stage from the high school, it is technically possible to make it happen."

"But how do we transport it from the high school? It's really heavy, you know?"

"We can ask the custodian to bring out a light truck. That won't be a problem."

"Hmm… Well, even before that, you see, the time allocated for the Handicrafts Club's performance——"

"The Drama Club will give up twenty minutes, allowing the Handicraft Club to have the time slot."

“What…?”

The Light Music Club president was dumbfounded by the Drama Club president’s second act of betrayal. Then, the Handicraft Club president replied with a smile.

“Thank you very much. In that case, I will also concede twenty minutes. The Handicraft Club can work with forty minutes, so I would like to ask someone else to kindly give up their remaining twenty minutes……”

The gaze of everyone in the room collectively turned on the Light Music Club president, who had secured the longest time slot. And then——

◇

“No, that was amazing. Your negotiation skills were incredible,” Masachika directed pure admiration towards the Handicraft Club president, who stayed behind to discuss specific details about the runway after the meeting. After all, the Handicraft Club president had successfully secured a forty-minute time slot for their club through a skillful negotiation that hinted at even convening a student council meeting if necessary.

“No, it was actually thanks to you, Vice President. Your support helped a lot"

“Well…. it wasn’t a big deal. Your negotiations were truly impressive. You presented clear benefits to each club while ensuring that you secured the most advantages……”

“Um, yeah… I guess so."

Slightly embarrassed, the Handicraft Club President scratched their cheek and stood up. She took off their shoes and propped one leg on the sofa. With their hand on their hip, they spoke while unabashedly exposing her white beautiful leg through the slit.

“After all, the bigger the slit, the greater the benefits!”

Masachika was struck by the truth of those words. Before he knew it, he couldn't stop his tears of admiration. Well, that would be a lie, but he was genuinely moved to that extent. And trembling with emotion, his lips involuntarily uttered a certain title.

"S-Slit-Paisen....!"

[1]: A narrow opening in the front of a dress which exposes one leg to help with mobility.

Afterword

Hello, it's SunSunSun, the author who, after numerous extended ten-page afterwords, has suffered brain damage and pulled off the great stunt of including an author's SS at the end, even though this isn't a comic tankobon.

Perhaps... No, almost certainly, this is an unprecedented attempt in the history of light novels. Yeah, there's no other author who would do such crazy things. In the first place, it's rare to find an author like me who doesn't properly manage the page count and ends up writing everything before realizing, "Wow, there are so many extra pages!" I'm probably the only one who goes as far as writing an SS to eliminate advertisements. Actually, I think other authors might be wondering, "Why is that person so energetic after submitting their manuscript...?" Well, that's how things stand nowadays.

So, to all the readers who think the afterword is the main content, I apologize! This time, the afterword is short! It's short and hard to find! From the next volume onwards, let's make sure to read the main content first! Well, if I were to write something like an afterword, I guess it would be about the performance Masha and Chisaki did in this volume. It was based on an actual performance I did during my student days. Sorry to everyone in the same club. I've revealed a few gimmicks, but I've kept it to a minimum, so please forgive me. No-gimmick dismemberment punishment! That's the only thing, ah, stop——

Ahem, so let's move on quickly to the acknowledgments. Once again, I deeply apologize to the editor, Miyakawa-sama, for causing a great deal of trouble with my last-minute progress. Thank you as always. I'm always greatly assisted by Miyakawa-sama's thoughtful consideration and accurate analysis.

And despite being incredibly busy, thank you so much, Momoco-sensei, for drawing many beautiful, magnificent, artistic illustrations that are absolutely not erotic. I apologize for always giving you detailed requests. The illustrations in this volume are breathtakingly beautiful, and they will surely have a significant impact on the sexual

inclinations of young people everywhere. I, too, thoroughly enjoyed the graceful beauty of Alya's legs. Yes, I absolutely had no ulterior motives. I truly appreciate your efforts.

Also, to Tenamachi-sensei, who is currently serializing the wonderful manga adaptation, increasing the number of Roshidere fans. Thank you for always depicting everyone in such an attractive way. The scene where Alya and Masachika wear socks made me involuntarily feel a sense of reverence from my nose. I had absolutely no ulterior motives for that either, but thank you very much.

And lastly, to everyone involved in the production of this work and to all the readers who have picked up this work, I express my utmost gratitude to the point where my eyes turn pitch black. Thank you very much! I hope we can meet again in the seventh volume. And now, finally...

Who said there was only one SS at the end?

＃ロシデレ
よろしくおねがいします

Afterword SS - Yuri Saves The World

"Hey, Ayano! Tiddy pillow!"

"At your service."

"Fluffy, squishy~. So soft and gentle."

Ayano laid on her back on the bed as Yuki covered her, pressing her face against Ayano's chest. Ayano, allowing Yuki to be pampered, waited until Yuki calmed down a bit before speaking up.

"What happened all of a sudden? Is there something wrong?"

There shouldn't have been any particularly stressful events for Yuki today. However, if Yuki was seeking comfort, Ayano worried that there might be something she hadn't noticed..... Concerned, she gently lifted Yuki's face from her chest. Yuki, sitting up, naturally unhooked Ayano's bra with ease, over her maid outfit. In just a second. And while kneading Ayano's breasts, now freed from her underwear, with both hands, Yuki tilted her head.

"Well, it's not like something happened..... Lately, the atmosphere at the executive committee's work has been so heavy, I thought I needed some refreshment....."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, yuri will save the world. No matter how harsh the battlefield may be, no matter how heavy the plot may become, when two beautiful girls frolic together, the consensus will be 'precious'!"

"....."

Yuki's words were always a bit difficult for Ayano to comprehend. Nevertheless, Yuki continued to speak confidently without paying attention to Ayano's reaction.

"And breasts also save the world! Everyone becomes happy with breasts! In other words! By combining yuri and breasts, world peace can be achieved!"

Asserting this, Yuki suddenly took out her smartphone and made a call. As soon as the other person answered, she shouted.

“Onii-chan, you think so too, right?!”

‘What’s with that so suddenly?’

“Blah-blah-blah, yada-yada-yada.”

‘Okay…… By the way, personally, I find it more appealing when girls comb each other’s hair rather than squeezing each other’s chests on the bed.’

“What……! Damn, that’s convincing…… You completely demolished me. Ah, I was wrong, onii-chan. Trying to combine everything was just a cheap move.”

‘Yes, there’s no need to force things together. Without combining everything, yuri has its own charm, and breasts have their own appeal.’

“You’re talking as if you know what it’s like to properly squeeze them, even though you’ve never actually done it.”

“Hey, why are we talking about this now——”

Without letting him finish, Yuki hung up the call and snapped her fingers above Ayano’s head.

“Hey, Ayano! Play some music! Elegant and calming…… yet not too provocative, with a touch of mystery!”

“At your service.”

In response to this somewhat unreasonable request, Ayano, however, managed to deliver. The room was filled with a perfectly chosen BGM, and Yuki nodded with satisfaction, then smoothly moved behind Ayano. Placing her arm around Ayano’s stomach and resting her chin on Ayano’s shoulder, Yuki whispered something in an adult-like expression and tone into Ayano’s ear.

“Oh, Ayano.”

“Y-Yuki-sama…?”

“Hehe, what’s the matter…? Your hair, it’s messy, isn’t it?”

Ayano's hair was disheveled because a certain someone had used her as a pillow just a moment ago. But without caring about such things, Yuki put on an enchanting smile and picked up a hairbrush.

"Can't help it, can you? Would you like me to comb your hair?"

"N-No, that's too much……"

"It's alright. You're like my adorable little sister, after all."

"Ah……"

While pulling off a mysteriously calm and composed older sister move, Yuki scooped up Ayano's hair. Although, to be honest, the situation of Ayano sitting on the bed while Yuki was clearly smaller in stature didn't look quite right from an outsider's perspective.

"Ayano, your hair is beautiful…… It's like that of a princess."

"T-Thank you… It's a lot of hair, so it takes effort to maintain……"

"I see. This beautiful hair is the result of your efforts."

With a confident smile, Yuki lifted Ayano's hair and then, suddenly, she kissed Ayano's nape.

"Hyaa, Yuki-sama…?!"

"Hehe, you're so cute, Ayano."

With a bewitching smile up close, Ayano widened her eyes and hesitantly opened her mouth.

"Um, about that……"

"Yeah?"

"Would it be alright if I took a shower?"

"You're getting serious, huh?"

Giving her a deadpan look and pinching her forehead, Ayano let out a yelp and quickly moved away from her. Yuki turned off the BGM and silence returned to the room. Yuki let out a sigh.

"That was close…… It almost turned into an ero-scene instead of a service scene."

“A service scene, you say?”

“Yeah, a service scene. Abbreviated as ‘SS’.”

While saying that, Yuki looked in a different direction and chuckled. Trying to follow her gaze, Ayano tilted her head but couldn’t find anything.

“Um, Yuki-sama, what are you looking at?”

“Huh? A camera that’s invisible to idiots.”

“So, Yuki-sama… you’re living in a world where I, an ordinary person, cannot see…!”

“No, don’t take it seriously.”

With a skeptical look, Ayano made a retort, and her smartphone buzzed next to Yuki. The screen displayed a message that said, “By the way, deliberately showing off yuri isn’t appealing.”

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